



A marriage of convenience

Comrades and the Mullahs: China, Afghanistan and the New Asian Geopolitics

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It may seem paradoxical that the Chinese authorities, who have unleashed a reign of terror on the Muslim population in Xinjiang, would be eager to forge an alliance with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. But long-term geopolitical interest, not necessarily ideology, has always been the main driving force behind Chinese foreign policy. The departure of the last Western troops from Kabul on 31 August 2021, meant that a potentially unpredictable, Islamic regime took over a strategically important – and extremely volatile – country in Central Asia. The West responded with boycotts, sanctions and vague promises of a ‘carrot’ in the form of humanitarian aid funnelled through the United Nations. China, on the other hand, decided to engage in a dialogue with the Taliban, and was able to do that through its trusted Pakistani allies. A week before the final fall of Kabul, Moed Yusuf, Pakistan’s then national security adviser, had a long discussion with Zhao Kezhi, state councillor and party committee secretary of China’s Ministry of Public Security, the country’s main intelligence agency. Yusuf later tweeted: “Pleasure to speak to my Chinese counterpart, excellency Zhao Kezhi, on ways to further strengthen our bilateral relationship. We discussed the situation in Afghanistan and agreed to maintain close coordination, including countering spoilers. We are moving forward with a vision.”

China’s interest in maintaining a relationship with the Taliban is obvious. The Chinese don’t want Afghanistan to become a sanctuary for the separatist movement in predominantly Muslim Xinjiang. Hu Xijin, the editor of the Chinese communist party mouthpiece, *The Global Times*, emphasised that point in a commentary that was published on 23 August 2021, and, perhaps more importantly, he went on to say that he expected the incoming Taliban government to “keep distance from the US and other forces that turn out to be hostile to China. They should refuse to act as a pawn for those forces to jeopardise China’s strategic interests”.

Ananth Krishnan and Stanly Johny’s book *Comrades and the Mullahs: China, Afghanistan and the New Asian Geopolitics* analyses brilliantly developments in Afghanistan from the 1970s to the present day. We learn about the rise of Osama bin Laden, how the Taliban emerged from the chaos that prevailed in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1988-89 and the first seizure of power by the Taliban in 1996, the 2001 US

invasion, which led to the instalment of a pro-Western government in Kabul, the failure of those efforts – and the return of the Taliban. Washington’s interests in Afghanistan were actually quite narrow. As the authors point out, “America went to Afghanistan because the 9/11 [2001 terror attacks in New York and Washington] originated from that country.” But the US decided to remain in Afghanistan even after the fall of the Taliban and did not withdraw even after Bin Laden was killed in his Pakistani hideout on 2 May 2011: “The US

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stayed on in Afghanistan, propping up the Islamic Republic because America’s leaders were of the view that a return of the Taliban to power would derail the global war on terror.”

China, contrastingly, saw, and still sees, Afghanistan as a pawn in its struggle for regional dominance in Central Asia and, by extension, South Asia. There was little Chinese involvement in Afghanistan during 2001-2021 period, and that was not surprising given the fact that the country was then, effectively, under US occupation. In 2014, then Afghan President Ashraf Ghani did pay a landmark visit to China where he was welcomed by his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping who did his utmost to encourage his guest to participate in Beijing’s global infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

But little came of it and although the China Metallurgical Group Corporation has in 2008 won the right to mine copper at Mes Anyak in Afghanistan for 30 years, no actual work on the site ever began.

After all, despite all the rhetoric post-2014, with Ghani’s visit to Beijing and Xi’s promotion of the BRI, there was little to show for this in Afghanistan. In 2020, the total Chinese foreign direct investment in Afghanistan was a paltry \$4.4 million, or less than 3 percent of...Chinese investment in Pakistan. (p?)

Now, Afghanistan’s new Taliban rulers seem to be encouraging Chinese investment which they hope will save their cash-starved country from crippling international sanctions. Commencing work at the Mes Anyak copper mine may be the first step the Chinese will take to establish influence over the country, which may, in the end, lead to an unholy strategic alliance between Beijing’s communist leaders and the Islamic fundamentalists in power in Kabul. According to Krishnan and Johny:

This state of play as the Taliban

returned reflected the curious dichotomy in China-Afghanistan relations. Both sides had their own reasons to trumpet the start of a new era: for the Taliban, China represented an important source of international legitimacy when its friends were few and far between; for China, the chaos of the US exit was a propaganda point to be milked at home, framed as a victory and yet another point of evidence of the inexorable decline of the West. (p?)

The groundwork for China’s new Afghanistan policy was laid by Yue Xiaoyong, who in July 2021, just as the US exit was drawing near, was appointed Beijing’s new special envoy to Kabul. Krishnan and Johny describe in detail how Yue has managed to woo the Taliban, and turn them into a Chinese ally in the making. They quote an interview with Yue in which he stated that “now that the Taliban are in power...the best thing for us is to engage in dialogue with them and to work with them to bring about peaceful reconciliation in Afghanistan...they are very friendly, they like to exchange ideas with me, to talk to other people, they listen to other people’s ideas and to explain things...I will say that China is a friend of Afghanistan”. Promoting Chinese investment may be on Yue’s agenda, but the bottom line, however, is that “security...is China’s priority, and

securing its western frontier will remain the abiding objective. Whatever economic benefits may accrue in the new era will be a bonus”.

China’s increasingly assertive behaviour comes at a time when Xi is consolidating his grip on power and, as the authors argue, Beijing’s “willingness to insert itself as a power player and act more forcefully to secure its economic and security interests in the neighbourhood”. But that also means that China gets entangled in some glaring contradictions. Two chapters are devoted to China’s persecution of Muslims. Up to a million Uighurs have been sent to so-called “vocational training” institutes, “meaning one out of every eight Uighurs, leaving out children and the elderly, has likely been taken forcibly into one of these centres”. Other minority Muslims living in Xinjiang have also been detained, including Kazachs and Huis. But the economic strength of China has resulted in a very muted response from the Muslim world. The authors quote an American Muslim scholar and activist as saying that “it’s very clear that China has an economic chokehold on the Muslim world and has been able to isolate every Muslim country into fear of even paying lip service to the Uighur case”. One example is Imran Khan, who frequently criticised India for alleged human rights abuses in Kashmir when he was Pakistan’s prime minister “but stayed mum on the Xinjiang issue despite repeated questions from both the Pakistani and foreign media”. What the Chinese said about the situation in Xinjiang, Pakistan had to accept, Imran Khan said.

China’s close relationship with Pakistan, the authors argue, has led to “another, perhaps more glaring contradiction in China’s diplomacy. While positioning itself as a victim of terrorism to justify the crackdown in Xinjiang, China would simultaneously become the sole defender of Pakistani terrorists abroad”. Repeated attempts by New Delhi to raise the issue of Pakistani-sponsored terrorism in India and have certain individuals and organisations sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council have been blocked by China – most recently a bid to designate Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed leader Abdul Rauf Azhar as a ‘global terrorist’. There are, as a chapter in the book says, “Good Terrorists, Bad Terrorists”. Now, the Taliban seems to be in the former category of terrorists.

This book is the first to describe the curious marriage of convenience between two regimes as diametrically opposite on the political scale as those of Beijing and Kabul, and Krishnan and Johny are well qualified to cover it with in-depth insight. Krishnan is the China correspondent for *The Hindu* based in Hong Kong and has reported on Chinese issues for close to a decade. Johny works as the international affairs editor with *The Hindu* and is the author of *The ISIS Caliphate: From Syria to the Doorsteps of India* (Bloomsbury India, 2018). While India also has economic, security and strategic interests in Afghanistan and had a very strong presence in the country before the return of the Taliban, recent events have created a dilemma for New Delhi’s security planners and for that reason alone this book should be widely read by anyone interested in the politics of Central Asia. The disheartening reality, though, is that “through all the churn, and the changing positions on the chessboard, there has only been one constant. That is the continued suffering of the Afghan people. That is the tragedy of Afghanistan”.