

China, Russia pip US to the Taliban hearth

by M. K. Bhadrakumar,* India



M. K. Bhadrakumar
(Photo ma)

The diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government in Afghanistan on January 31, 2024 by China must be bracketed with two other far-reaching regional policy moves by Beijing in the post-cold war era – the *Shanghai Five* in 1996 – later re-

named as *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation* (SCO) in 2001– and the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) announced by President *Xi Jinping* in 2013.

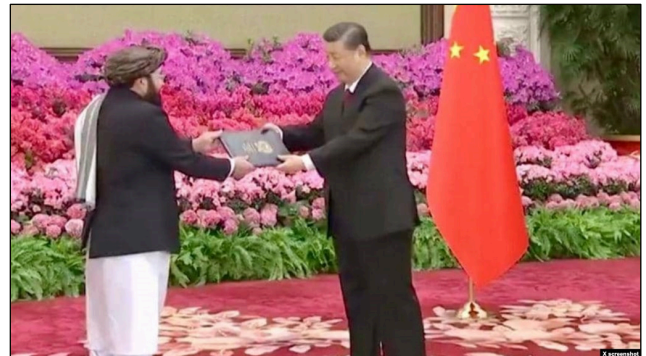
A regional security architecture is emerging with the above three legs reinforcing, supplementing and interchanging in a creative response to the rapidly transforming international environment. If the SCO marked China's return to Central Asia after nearly a century and the BRI creates massive strategic depth for China's global rise, the move on Afghanistan has geopolitical characteristics in relation to the Asian Century.

At its most obvious level, Beijing has outwitted the US' surreptitious, attempts in the recent months to return to Afghanistan after its humiliating military defeat and exit in 2021. The Biden Administration produced in the public domain a *back-dated document*¹ titled *Integrated Country Strategy for Afghanistan* on the same day that *Xi Jinping* received the letter of credentials from the Taliban ambassador at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on January 30.

The document contained the following core elements:

- "Predatory powers like Iran, China and Russia seek strategic and economic advantage (in

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Chinese President *Xi Jinping* (R) receiving the credentials of Taliban government's ambassador to China, *Asadullah Bilal Karimi* in a formal ceremony, Great Hall of the People, Beijing, Jan. 30, 2024. (Picture ma)

Afghanistan) or at a minimum to put the US at a disadvantage";

- "Even as, – and for as long as – the United States does not recognise the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, we must build functional relationships that fulfil our (US) objectives";
- "With diaspora Afghans, we discourage support for a new armed conflict through resistance group proxies in Afghanistan – more violence or regime change is not the solution to the Taliban";
- "we must simultaneously pump unprecedented amounts of humanitarian assistance into the country, convince the Taliban to adopt international economic norms and advocate tirelessly for education";
- "With the Taliban we advocate for consular access ..."

The document is a shameful retreat from the thundering US rhetoric that unless the Taliban fulfilled its conditions, Washington would ostracise the government in Kabul and freeze its bank accounts. Apparently, the Biden administration no longer insists on its demands and is knocking at Kabul gates for entry.

Interestingly, the document, while taking note of the human rights conditions in Afghanistan and the absence of a broad-based government in Kabul, acknowledges that regime change is no longer an option. It calls on the diaspora Afghans (who are largely in the West) to reconcile with the

Kabul government and seeks a consular presence for the US in Afghanistan.

The US is nervous about the Russian and Chinese approaches vis-a-vis the Taliban government. Conceivably, we need to reassess the US invitation to the Pakistani army chief Gen. *Asim Munir* to pay a 5-day visit to America in end-December, engaging in discussions with senior officials, including Secretary of State *Antony Blinken* and Secretary of Defense General *Lloyd Austin*. Going back even further, it is also necessary to contextualise the ouster of former Pakistani prime minister *Imran Khan*² (“Taliban Khan”) from power by the military, with American support. Pakistan’s role becomes crucial as Central Asian states harmonise with Russia and China. (See my blog *Decoding Iran’s missile, drone strikes*,³ *Indian Punchline*, Jan. 18, 2024)

Sensing the American moves to return to Central Asia and reboot the great game, Russia and China are determined to stay two steps ahead in engaging with the Taliban government. Most certainly, China’s diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government is in coordination with Russia. On the same day that Xi Jinping received the credentials letter from the Taliban ambassador, the special envoys of Russia and China visited Kabul and took part in a meeting under the rubric *Regional Cooperation Initiative* convened by the Taliban government which was attended by diplomats from Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, India, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Turkey and Indonesia. Taliban acting foreign minister *Amir Khan Muttaqi* addressed the meeting.

All the same, the Chinese decision to recognise the Taliban government cannot be seen through the prism of the great game. In the economic sphere, China is already a big stakeholder in Afghanistan and its equity is growing. Equally, Kabul is an enthusiastic votary of the *Belt and Road* and potentially, Afghanistan is another gateway for China to the Gulf region and beyond. China is planning a direct road link connecting Xinjiang with Afghanistan via *Wakhan Corridor*.⁴

At long last, the construction work on the missing link in the *China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway*⁵ is also commencing – a new strategic Eurasia logistic network along the Belt and Road route that can connect Afghanistan with both China and the European market.

Indeed, the geopolitical significance of the China-Afghanistan normalisation is to be meas-

ured in global terms in the contemporary world situation. A friendly government in Kabul gives China enormous strategic depth to push back the US’ hostile moves in Asia-Pacific.

The bottom line is that China is establishing formal links with a militant Islamist movement that once harboured *Osama bin Laden* and that is happening at a time when the US is demonising the resistance movements in the Muslim Middle East and has unleashed a vicious boring campaign against them in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Of course, the resistance movements in the Muslim Middle East will draw inspiration from China’s example.

Equally, the participation of 9 regional states – Indonesia and India, in particular – in the regional meeting hosted by the Taliban government in Kabul is an assertion of the Asian Century. Addressing the meeting in Kabul, Taliban’s foreign minister *Muttaqi* emphasised that these nations “should hold regional dialogues to increase and continue the positive interaction with Afghanistan”. *Muttaqi* asked the participants to take advantage of emerging opportunities in Afghanistan for the development of the region and to also “coordinate the management of potential threats”.

He stressed the need for positive interactions with the countries of the region and asked the diplomats to convey the Taliban’s message of a “region-oriented initiative” to their countries so that Afghanistan and the region can jointly take advantage of new opportunities for the benefit of all. Reports in the Afghan media quoted *Muttaqi* as saying that the meeting was focused on discussions for establishing a “region-centric narrative aimed at developing regional cooperation for a positive and constructive engagement between Afghanistan and regional countries”. (*here*)⁶

Without doubt, China has now shown the way that the era of imperialism is buried forever and erstwhile colonial powers should realise that their dubious methods of “divide and rule” no longer works.

The State Department’s Integrated Country Strategy for Afghanistan is quintessentially old wine in a new bottle. Reading between the lines, the US hopes to revive its interventionist policies in Afghanistan for geopolitical purposes, while shedding crocodile tears over the human rights situation. Its strategic calculus is a morbid mix of geopolitics and Neo-mercantilism.

However, Taliban is unlikely to fall for it, being witness to the US' bombing campaign against Muslim nations on an industrial scale that harks back to the two-decade long western occupation of Afghanistan.

The back-dated state department document is a knee-jerk reaction by the *Biden* Administration as word spread that Beijing is moving towards diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government with the active support of Moscow and Beijing aiming at creating a firewall to prevent further manipulation of the Afghan situation by the West. Short of an outright recognition, Moscow has extended a vital lifeline for Kabul.

It was no coincidence that Xi Jinping received the new Taliban ambassador at the Great Hall of

the People in Beijing on the very same day that the Taliban government unveiled its regional initiative.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/china-russia-pip-us-to-the-taliban-hearth/>, 6 February 2024

¹ https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ICS_SCA_Afghanistan_14NOV2023_PUBLIC.pdf

² <https://www.cfr.org/blog/pakistans-opposition-leader-imran-khan-jailed-election-looms?>

³ <https://www.indianpunchline.com/decoding-irans-missile-drone-strikes/>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wakhan_Corridor

⁵ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/full-steam-ahead-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway>

⁶ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-among-10-countries-to-participate-in-meeting-convened-by-taliban-in-kabul-101706549349569-amp.html>