

China's Current Security Approaches and Interests in Afghanistan

Testimony Before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, May 12, 2022

Raffaello Pantucci, Senior Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Singapore

China's security interests and approaches to Afghanistan and its environs are shaped by a concern that threats from this region might ultimately come back to hurt China. This is either from Uyghur separatists which Beijing fears are hiding in the region, or increasingly the growing number of regional groups that have identified China as an adversary. This shapes China's security responses in the region. But underpinning the direct security responses that China undertakes is a vision for economic prosperity and development across the region which Beijing believes will ultimately stabilize the region and deliver long-term security guarantees.

1. *In what ways does China hedge its relationship with the Taliban through bilateral and multilateral security initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the quadrilateral counter-terrorism cooperation mechanism (QCCM) with China, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan? Does China use these organizations primarily for security cooperation and training or to establish blocks of political influence? Has China's investment in these organizations, either in manpower or money, changed since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan?*

China has always sought to hedge its security concerns with Afghanistan through multiple avenues of engagement. Since the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, China has largely sought to continue its regional activities as before. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has continued to hold a number of meetings and engagements, including a heads of state hybrid summit held in Dushanbe in September 2021. China participated in this and other SCO sessions in much the same way it has before, seeking to engage through the format, but not appearing to force through anything new. President Xi in his remarks during the summit focused heavily on Afghanistan and spoke of China's goals as being: "One, the peaceful transfer of power to Afghanistan. Second, contact and communicate with Afghanistan. Third, provide humanitarian and anti-epidemic assistance to the Afghan people."¹ He also called on the United States to play a greater role in providing funding to stabilize the country, releasing funds being held up by Washington, and help Afghanistan out of its economic funk. The major achievement of the Summit was the admission of Iran into the organization, and while Afghanistan hung heavy over the discussions – it was likely too close to the fall of Kabul to be able to properly adjust and respond. There was some discussion about how the Taliban should be engaged with now it was the de facto government of Afghanistan, but it was not something that Beijing expressed a view on.² This attitude is likely to persist with the SCO, with China continuing to highlight Afghanistan as an issue within the organization, and repeating these talking points, but unlikely to be actively pushing towards the SCO doing much more – in particular as there does not seem to be a consensus amongst members about exactly how to handle Taliban-led Afghanistan.

Looking to the Quadrilateral Cooperation Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) – this was an institution that was developed in large part as a result of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) seeking to play a greater role in Afghanistan. When it was established in 2016, it came as part of a larger effort where China was seeking to strengthen its direct border relations with Afghanistan – there was discussion about undertaking more training and even potentially building a base with the Afghans in Badakhshan.

¹ http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/2018/commentaries/202109/t20210926_800259123.html

² <https://eurasianet.org/csto-sco-summits-presage-policy-of-wary-tolerance-of-taliban-regime-in-afghanistan>

It was also the moment around which the discussion of the Chinese base in Tajikistan became more publicly acknowledged. After this initial appearance by the QCCM, it went quiet, though it continued to provide a convening function for China to engage with its regional partners on border security questions in particular. Afghan officials acknowledged its utility in particular in trying to manage complex security questions in remote Badakhshan. Given the official partner in the engagement would have to be government of Afghanistan's Ministry of Defence, it would require formal recognition of the Islamic Emirate government for it to be formally included and revived, meaning its revivification is something which would only be possible in the wake of formal recognition of the authority in Kabul – a step Beijing is unlikely to take first.

At the same time, in many ways, China has already recognized the Islamic Emirate government. Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted his Pakistani counterpart Qureshi and Amir Muttaqi in April 2022 on the fringes of the larger regional meeting hosted by China at Tunxi.³ This format replicates an earlier multilateral engagement that China used to host which brought together senior foreign ministry officials between the three countries. In June 2021, two months before the collapse of the Republic government, Wang Yi hosted a virtual engagement involving Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi and then-Foreign Minister Atmar.⁴ This highlights China's desire to attempt to re-engage with the Islamic Emirate government in the same way that it was engaging with the Republic beforehand, restoring the same structures. Given the fact this has now happened with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it would not be impossible for a similar event to be held between Defence Ministries of the three powers. It is worth noting though that the QCCM is a structure theoretically represented by the Chiefs of Defence Staff which would be a different form of engagement to political ministries.

There have also been reports that China has helped facilitate engagements between the Islamic Emirate security authorities and the Pakistani intelligence services, in an attempt to help get them to resolve some of their differences.⁵ Issues that have become more acute in the recent past as Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have increased the tempo of their attacks in Pakistan, and in return Pakistani authorities have launched cross-border strikes alongside violent border clashes between Afghan and Pakistani fighters.⁶ If confirmed, China's attempt to step into the middle of this divide suggests a recognition by China of the role it can play in trying to stabilize the relationship between the two countries, leveraging the relationships that it has developed. Within these contexts, China appears to be trying to improve relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, while also building up its on bilateral links to both. The aim ultimately is to enable China to have good security relations, establish influence and place China in a significant role across the wider region.

It is difficult to discern at the moment the degree to which China has actually increased its engagement or activity within these structures since the takeover, though there are persistent rumours of increased Chinese security engagement with the Taliban. The exact nature of these contacts is unknown. Whatever the case, the key driver of Chinese engagement is recognition that the Islamic Emirate authority appears like the most stable governance structure in Afghanistan for the immediate future and therefore an entity that Beijing will have to engage with if it wants to ensure its security interests in Afghanistan. While in the early days, much of the noise around China's security concerns was focused on the potential for Uyghur militants to establish themselves, it appears as though the Islamic Emirate's decision to move what Uyghur networks were present to locations far from Afghanistan's regions closest to China has to some degree soothed Chinese concerns.⁷ The more likely

³ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220331_10658064.html

⁴ <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceuk/eng/zgyw/t1881345.htm>

⁵ <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2022/04/14/guoanbu-calls-on-isi-to-cooperate-with-taliban-secret-services,109767975-art>

⁶ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem>

⁷ <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-uyghurs-china/31494226.html>

concern at the moment is the growing violence in Pakistan which as has been seen in a number of recent attacks has led to the deaths of Chinese nationals.⁸

While China is still reticent to transfer all its former engagements with Kabul to the new government, it is clear that Beijing is increasingly moving in this direction. The ultimate goal will be not only to help strengthen China's relations and influence, but more specifically to ensure security guarantees from potential threats that may develop. It is worth remembering that from China's perspective, in many ways, the earlier relationship with the Republic government was one that Beijing appreciated as the Republic authorities for the most part shared their assessment about Uyghur militants being a group that needed clamping down on. While there was some evidence that this relationship had started to sour in the final months of the Republic government, there was also evidence that this had also created some tension with the incoming government which failed to monitor the escape of a number of Uyghur's in detention when they took over the country.⁹

This aspect is significant as it shows the levels of mistrust that China still needs to overcome in terms of its security relationships with Kabul, meaning Beijing will continue to seek to hedge rather than put all its eggs in one basket. This is likely to be a key aspect of the engagements China undertakes, with no single avenue being used, but instead a web of connections both with the Islamic Emirate authorities, regional powers, as well as long-established and more recently developed regional formats. Alongside this, China will continue its policy of strengthening its security relations with Tajikistan and Pakistan – with a particular emphasis on border security – to ultimately provide a hard security guarantee to accompany the multiplicity of political engagements. This hedging approach is a continuation of the approach that China has been taking with Afghanistan since at least 2014.

- 2. Please describe China's security presence in neighboring countries aimed at reducing extremist threats. What Chinese organizations are present (e.g., Peoples Armed Police, Ministry of State Security, private security companies), and how do they cooperate with host governments? Is their focus stopping flows into Xinjiang, or has it moved toward creating stability in the the region? What changes, if any, has China made to their security presence in Tajikistan and neighboring countries in the last year, including any use of People's Liberation Army (PLA) units, increased militia presence, or additional training exercises outside of China's borders?*

The primary goal of China's security actors in neighbouring countries is to provide guarantees for China, as well as eyes and ears onto possible security threats from the region which might come back to China. Within the context of Pakistan and Afghanistan, this extends to worrying about the threats exacerbating tensions around the region, as well as threatening Chinese nationals or interests in the region. However, this latter concern is a secondary one, with the primary concern being domestic security. Thus far, there is confirmed presence of the People's Armed Police (PAP) in Tajikistan,¹⁰ as well as reports they have in the past undertaken joint patrols with Republic forces in Afghanistan.¹¹ The principal aim of these security forces has been to help China have an ability to have a direct reach into local security forces, to enable them to have a greater sense of control over the potential threats that might emerge. There is also a history of China providing security support through equipment to Pakistani forces in Gilgit Baltistan, strengthening the other indirect border China shares with Afghanistan.

⁸ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Karachi-terror-attack-strains-Pakistan-s-ties-with-China>

⁹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2021/10/16/exclusive-uyghur-jailbreak-complicates-talibans-ties-china/>

¹⁰ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/tajikistan/b87-rivals-authority-tajikistans-gorno-badakhshan>

¹¹ <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/03/05/chinese-troops-appear-to-be-operating-in-afghanistan-and-the-pentagon-is-ok-with-it/>

It is difficult to trace the movements of the Ministry of State Security (MSS). The most visible appearance of MSS operatives in Afghanistan took place in late 2020, when the Republic authorities disrupted a spy network in Kabul which they accused of collusion with anti-government factions on the ground. Their ejection was rapid and kept relatively discrete by the Afghan and Chinese authorities, as the Republic government had little incentive at that stage to entirely sabotage its relationship with Beijing. However, it was notable that reporting indicated that at least one of the men who had been ejected had been masquerading as a pine nut trader – a trade that Beijing has been encouraging between China and Afghanistan, but which also provides China with a good reason to engage with farmers in parts of Afghanistan where Uyghur militant groups have been active.¹²

This economic engagement has also been seen in other contexts, where China has used direct aid to the regions in Afghanistan near to its borders to try to develop links and contacts on the ground.¹³ While there is a logic to cultivating these relationships due to their border proximity and the humanitarian needs on the ground, it also provides a good opportunity for intelligence gathering and an excuse for China to maintain eyes on the ground.

The final element which is difficult to further quantify is the presence of Chinese private security companies. While they have been seen in Kyrgyzstan, and are believed to be present in Tajikistan, it is difficult to pin down their activities in other places.¹⁴ Reports from the ground suggest that some have started to emerge in Afghanistan, and since the recent attacks on Chinese nationals in nearby Pakistan, it is likely the presence of private Chinese security firms will increase there as well.

Whatever its scale and vector, the decision to assert some security presence is reflection of a sense of trepidation, and a continued fear that the situation in Kabul might abruptly destabilize. What remains constant, is China's single-minded focus on its own interests, rather than trying to bring regional stability. Quite aside from not having any experience in bringing peace brokering initiatives to life, China is also disinterested in engaging in regional issues between powers as this will force China to take sides, something which will only weaken Beijing's hand before some of the parties. By maintaining its objective view, this enables China to continue to cultivate all sides.

- 3. What lessons or assessments can be drawn from China's undeclared persistent security force presence in Tajikistan? How might the presence of armed forces from China in Tajikistan be indicative of future armed force projection (whether People's Armed Police, PLA, contract, or based on other military or paramilitary forces)? To what extent is that presence indicative of China's leadership expanding their definition of China's "border region" in their security interests? What opportunities or burdens does China perceive in its growing security presence in and around Afghanistan?*

The deployment of a Chinese People's Armed Police (PAP) base in Tajikistan has been overread as evidence of Chinese security stretch into Central Asia. China has long been providing military support for Tajikistan to strengthen its borders with Afghanistan, recognizing that the long and porous border between the two countries represented a weak point in the region.¹⁵ This mirrors Russia's own continued to provide military support in Tajikistan and continued to maintain its largest military base outside its own borders in Tajikistan, the 201st Military Base which is divided between Dushanbe and Bokhtar, done under agreement with the Tajiks until 2042.¹⁶ The aim of this Russian presence is to help monitor and address potential threats that might emanate from Afghanistan through Tajikistan

¹² <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/did-china-build-a-spy-network-in-kabul/>

¹³ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1243022.shtml>

¹⁴ <https://oxussociety.org/the-growth-adaptation-and-limitations-of-chinese-private-security-companies-in-central-asia/>

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tajikistan-china-border-idUSKCN11W0T1>

¹⁶ <https://tass.com/defense/1394749>

and ultimately threaten Russia. The Russian base has continued to be active, undertaking regular training exercises,¹⁷ including a surge of effort around the time of the fall of Kabul to the Taliban.¹⁸

While the Chinese presence is more limited than the Russian one, and with a very different history, the ultimate goals are similar. Beijing, like Moscow, is concerned about potential threats from Afghanistan spilling into Tajikistan, and recognizes that the border regions which China has with Tajikistan are adjacent to the border regions Tajikistan shares with Afghanistan. Remote and rugged, these are regions which are hard to entirely monitor and there is little faith in Tajik capabilities to ensure security coverage. As a result, Beijing has on the one hand provided regular military support to the Tajiks, but it has also chosen to ensure it has some of its own eyes on the potential threats and problems that might emerge. This is the fundamental reason for the Chinese presence. It is additionally significant to note that the security force that is being used is the People's Armed Police (PAP), an extension of a domestic security agency. This is the same force that has played an important role in building bilateral engagements with Uzbek, Kazakh and Kyrgyz security forces, reflecting the fact that China sees security threats in Central Asia as ones that have the potential to be linked directly to domestic security threats.

While China continues to refuse to entirely admit to the basing, when pressed, Chinese experts compare the engagements in Tajikistan to what Chinese security forces have done in the Golden Triangle region of Southeast Asia with which China shares borders. In the wake of the brutal kidnap and massacre of Chinese sailors in October 2011,¹⁹ China started to undertake joint patrols with Laotian, Thai, Myanmar and Cambodian forces to try to ensure better security in the region.²⁰ In some cases, the Chinese provided equipment, and have now started to explore basing in the region.²¹ This is similar to the context in Tajikistan, where there is a live security concern that Beijing is worried about in a neighbour where Beijing obviously has little faith in their capabilities to provide security assurances. The result has been to increase its direct security equity to be able to provide and ensure for its concerns – something articulated through equipment and funding support, the establishment of forward bases, and the creation of overlapping multilateral and minilateral institutions that provide opportunities for engagement.

The aim here is not to provide regional stability, but rather to ensure Chinese security concerns. There has been little evidence of China wanting to take a wider security leadership role, instead, China has retained a narrow focus on its own interests. The useful contrast is to examine Russian security engagement which while also fundamentally about Russian concerns about instability in the region impacting Russia directly, is interpreted in a far more expansive fashion whereby Russia sees itself as an ultimate security guarantor across the region. Witness the surge of Russian security engagement and activity at around the time of the fall of Kabul, and the Russian willingness to deploy to support the Kazakh government in the wake of violent protests in January 2022. Neither of these are roles that China sees for itself, where instead there was a limited increase in Chinese engagement with Tajikistan during the summer of 2022, but this was simply building on what China was already doing, rather than expanding it.

In terms of lessons that can be drawn from this, it is that China remains a fundamentally solipsistic regional security actor, focused single-mindedly on its concerns which it interprets through a fairly narrow lens. What is interesting is the fact that it appeared in the early days of China's deployment of forces and base establishment in Tajikistan, it appeared to be something that was not done in

¹⁷ <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/76143/>

¹⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-military-drills-near-afghan-border-deliver-warning-to-extremists-11635188626>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/10/chinese-sailors-killed-mekong-river>

²⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-southeastasia-drugs-mekong-idUKKCN0WH2ZW>

²¹ <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-says-cambodia-not-transparent-about-chinese-role-in-naval-base-construction-/6272820.html>

consultation with Moscow, with reports from the ground suggesting Russia was surprised by the reports of the base's establishment. This illustrates a tension between Beijing and Moscow which is worth considering, though not overstating, as it is clear that both countries have been able to move beyond these initial tensions. It is also notable, however, that they have not actually done anything to undertake cooperation in Tajikistan on security questions notwithstanding a presence that is near to each other on the ground. The key point is that while they are willing to work side by side, when it comes to hard security concerns on the ground, both clearly want to have their own eyes on problems, rather than relying on each other. And even more crucially, this does not seem a competitive relationship, but rather one that functions in parallel.

The overarching take-away from this deployment is that China is still not interested in taking a utopian approach to regional security, but is focused on its own security concerns. It will focus on these interests through multiple and overlapping approaches which will collectively provide China with enough assurance to be content. In the case of Afghanistan, this includes regional engagement as well as engagement with the Taliban with the two parts of the piece providing assurance to each other. It is questionable whether this model is one that China would offer in other contexts as well, outside direct border regions, as the fundamental driver to China's concerns in Tajikistan and Afghanistan are ultimately the potential impact this could have back to China directly.

4. *Is there risk of actors being drawn into or choosing to engage in proxy wars through unattributable support to militant groups in and around Afghanistan? How does any potentially increased risk emanating from Afghanistan impact existing internal security concerns in Tajikistan, Pakistan, or for others in the region? What might this look like, and how might it affect U.S. interests in the region?*

There has been a clear and growing problem of terrorist groups using Afghanistan once again as a base to launch attacks on neighbours. At the moment, the problem is most acute with Pakistan where the TTP in particular has increased its presence and violence within Pakistan from bases in Afghanistan, but it is notable that Balochi militancy has also been increasing as a problem for the past few years with a sharpening focus on China. The recent attack at Karachi University which led to the death of the Confucius Institute Director, two of his Chinese staff and their driver, was conducted by the Majeed Brigade of the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), a unit that has undertaken repeated lethal attacks on Chinese interests in Pakistan. In Central Asia, Chinese interests have not recently been targeted in the same way – but the 2016 attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek was an illustration of the dangers that exist for China in the region.²² The recent cross border shootings and growing rhetorical effort being undertaken by the Islamic State in Khorasan Province's (ISKP) to garner support and threaten Central Asia are illustrations of how problems in Afghanistan are reaching across borders north into Central Asia as well as south into Pakistan.²³ The fact ISKP has also made specific threats towards China further sharpens this concern towards Beijing.²⁴

This violence has already created some problems for regional relations. Pakistani forces have launched cross-border incursions into Afghanistan to address with threats they observe from there. There has also been a notable number of violent deaths of TTP leaders in Afghanistan since attempted peace talks between the TTP and government in Pakistan dissolved late in 2021. To the north, the Uzbek airforce has launched strikes into Afghanistan in response to concerns about ISKP threats from there. And there have been border clashes between IEA forces and their counterparts on Afghanistan's borders with Pakistan and Iran.

²² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-blast-china-idUSKCN11C1DK>

²³ <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/05/05/islamic-state-uzbekistan/>

²⁴ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3151791/why-did-isis-k-say-its-suicide-bomber-was-uygur>

Underpinning all of this violence is a fear of groups being manipulated by outside forces. Pakistan, for example, has long accused Balochi groups of being in the pay of India – a paranoia which is sometimes echoed in Chinese statements around attacks.²⁵ The evidence base for this is difficult to ascertain in the public domain. In some cases, Chinese paranoia takes this one step further and point to the United States as a possible outside actor manipulating forces. An early narrative that was advanced in the immediate wake of the collapse of the Republic government (which is heard less now) was that the United States was seeking to manipulate Uyghur groups in the region to threaten China.²⁶ The decision in late 2020 by the Trump administration to remove the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) from its list of proscribed terror organizations was seen by China as a prelude to a move by Washington to engage with the group as a proxy against China.²⁷

More recently, Chinese officials have stopped making such references publicly, though it remains to be seen if this is because of a lack of concern or simply a decision to not antagonise the relationship with Washington. The recent decision by the US government to include the Central Asian group Katibat Tawheed wal Jihad (KTJ) on its list of proscribed organizations specifically referring to the group as being responsible for the 2016 attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek might have been an attempt to mend this fence by Washington.²⁸ But until a decision is made to return Uyghur militants to the list of proscribed organizations, there will continue to be paranoia in China. Beijing continues to worry about the manipulation of groups in the region in advance of larger geopolitical interests, be this directed by Delhi, Washington, or others.

It is possible that China might seek to undertake similar manipulations itself. There have been reports of efforts by Chinese security and intelligence to develop contacts with potential proxies in border regions with India in Myanmar or Bangladesh to undermine Indian security.²⁹ But in the Afghan and Pakistani context, most of these stories have instead pointed to China seeking to develop connections with groups with the idea in mind of trying to get them to stop attacking Chinese interests.³⁰ It would presumably not be impossible for China to seek to manipulate groups to attack western or other adversary interests, but at the same time, Beijing does not have much form in successfully doing this. And for most of the violent groups in the region, there is a growing interest in targeting China recognizing as they do Beijing's growing influence and power across the region. Manipulations could easily backfire.

The primary danger to US interests lies in the broader violent trends in the region which could develop into threats which start to reach out beyond the region. There is also the potential danger to the US presence in the region – for example, diplomatic staff, businessmen, or travellers. If violence in Pakistan continues to escalate, it would be likely that US or allied interests might come into the cross-hairs of violent groups. The danger of proxy warfare through such groups in the region is another possible threat vector, but the risk comes more from the US being seen as being linked to such manipulations or India being discovered as being linked to violence. Both of these would escalate violence in the region, and increase the threat from groups which might even start to stretch beyond the region.

²⁵ <https://www.firstpost.com/world/china-warns-india-says-it-will-intervene-if-new-delhi-foments-trouble-in-balochistan-2980404.html>

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https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202103/t20210327_9170714.html

²⁷ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-irate-after-u-s-removes-terrorist-label-from-separatist-group-11604661868>

²⁸ <https://www.state.gov/terrorist-designation-of-katibat-al-tawhid-wal-jihad/>

²⁹ <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/beijing-said-to-fund-separatist-india?s=r>

³⁰ <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-balochistan-china-seperatists-talks/29055188.html>

Finally, by increasing its security connections across the region, China is embedding itself further into the region. This could in the longer-term translate into influence which further locks the United States out of the region – part of a much bigger trend which has been visible across the wider region. While the US remains a significant player, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, worsening relations with Pakistan and worsening relations with Iran, Russia and China all mean this is a part of the world where the US is increasingly seen in an adversarial light. As Chinese influence increases, and as long as US-China relations remain tense, this is likely to harden further.

5. *The Commission is mandated to make policy recommendations to Congress based on its hearings and other research. What are your recommendations for Congressional action related to your testimony?*

It is difficult to make recommendations without knowing more about what current action is already being taken, so these suggestions are simply ideas or areas in which the United States could explore taking steps forwards in the near term future in the region.

First – the US should try to avoid seeing the region through the lens of big power politics. Afghanistan has in the recent past been a place where the US and China have been able to cooperate to address mutual threats and concerns. Such cooperation might be impossible at the moment, but avoiding going too far in the other direction will enable the US to continue to try to address the humanitarian questions that exist across the region while also making overwatch of potential security threats that might emerge from militant groups more possible.

Second – the US should explore reversing the decision to remove ETIM from the proscribed terror list. While re-listing may be complicated, recognizing that there are some Uyghur groups that have made connections to violent jihadist groups is an important element to restore faith in US focus on genuine terror threats as opposed to political games being played through such proxies.

Third – unblock funding which could be used to improve the lives of ordinary Afghans. This will be difficult as the IEA government has shown repeatedly it is disinterested in meeting western demands around women's rights, but those who suffer are the Afghan people and finding ways of reaching out positively to them is important. It will remove a plank of China's narratives in Afghanistan.

Fourth – increase direct support for border security forces in Central Asia. The United States already has strong links and has provided support across the region. Continuing and exploring expanding this support is an important signal to the region as well as a way of building US ability to mitigate risks and maintain security overwatch in the region.

Fifth – work to encourage Pakistan to try improve the security situation in Balochistan through negotiations. The situation in Balochistan is worsening at the moment and it is possible Pakistan will react to it with a harder crackdown. Engaging with the new government in Islamabad to take a new approach might enable a new dynamic in the region which would strengthen the US hand in the region.