Afghanistan: Chinese Reconstruction vs. US Sanctions

Beijing now has a key opportunity to demonstrate the stark contrast between its brand of foreign policy and Washington’s through its own plan to aid in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

A Global Times piece titled, “China to offer 'genuine' aid in Afghanistan's economic reconstruction amid chaotic transition,” in title alone infers that the US - despite occupying Afghanistan for two decades - never genuinely sought to build up the nation.

Ironically, this is not a notion entertained only by Beijing and its allies - it has also been the theme of the US government’s own Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) quarterly reports for years.

China’s plans for Afghanistan (which include projects already completed or underway) involve highways, factories, rail lines, and other essential infrastructure projects. Over the last 20 years US SIGAR reports indicated most US “reconstruction” funding went to building up Afghanistan’s police and military or to corrupt contractors who worked on minor infrastructure projects with little or no concern about their outcome once the projects were completed, if they were even completed.

Mention of actual infrastructure projects in SIGAR reports is sparse with a focus instead placed on keeping locals dependent on USAID handouts rather than creating any sort of sustainable economic self-sufficiency.

And while on paper the contrast between Beijing’s proposals and Washington’s approach over the last 2 decades to
foreign policy is clear, China now has an opportunity to fully demonstrate these differences on-the-ground.

The Global Times piece states:

While the wait-and-see approach is a result of SOEs [state-owned enterprises] weighing up both political security risks and China's national strategy, the boldness of risk-taking private firms also underscores China's successful diplomacy with the Taliban, which lays the foundation for the safe and smooth operation of Chinese businesses in Afghanistan.

Chinese private firms are set to stand firm in Afghanistan, despite Western governments' potential sanctions on the Taliban, a move that maliciously aims to advance Western geopolitical objectives and stifle China's economic interests, said industry insiders.

The article notes the potential impact of US sanctions on Chinese companies already operating in Afghanistan - a destructive policy the US can employ to further grind Afghanistan into dust without the need of a costly military occupation.

US sanctions will seek to compound the disastrous state Afghanistan has been left in after two decades of US military occupation by deliberately creating and perpetuating the conditions for extremism and division to fester, further impeding China’s attempts to drive development across Eurasia and beyond.

The Global Times piece cites a Chinese researcher, Qian Feng of the National Strategy Institute at Tsinghua University, who claimed the US and its allies are concerned, even envious of the potential the economic vacuum left in Afghanistan will be filled by Chinese firms.

Yet this was a vacuum the US never intended to fill itself and a vacuum the US will attempt to maintain for as long as possible after its departure.

**The US Never Wanted to Build Up Afghanistan**

The US government’s decision to withdraw from Afghanistan and the method it chose to do so, created historical scenes of a humiliated and defeated empire limping away from a two decade-long war and a client regime built up during those two decades that collapsed in mere days.

Much analysis and commentary has explored why this happened but ultimately it is incredibly simple - the US never intended or attempted to build up a credible government or a unified, stable Afghan nation with the necessary infrastructure required for a modern nation-state to thrive.

America’s presence in Afghanistan served a wider geopolitical objective, the encirclement and containment of Russia, China, and also Iran. Its proximity to Pakistan was also a key motivation.

America’s position in the region allowed the US to drive extremism it could then export into eastern Iran, across Central Asia, and into western China and Pakistan.

This extremism would help impede the development of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) including a crucial juncture in Xinjiang in western China and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in western Pakistan. It also would help destabilize Central Asia, creating a pretext for US “anti-terrorism” mission creep along Russia’s peripheries. The US position in Afghanistan also created the potential to apply additional pressure on Iran by sponsoring armed militant groups operating along Iran’s eastern borders.

At one point between 2011 and 2012 the US was even eagerly promoting armed separatism in Pakistan’s western Baluchistan province with retired United States Army lieutenant colonel Ralph Peters and others testifying before the US Congress about the possibility of giving American troops occupying Afghanistan access to the Arabian Sea by creating a US-friendly client regime in a hypothetically independent Baluchistan.

A client regime controlling an independent Baluchistan, bordering Afghanistan, would mean Gwadar Port - instead of serving as the terminal destination of CPEC for China and Pakistan - would be transformed into a logistical hub for US military operations (overt and covert) across Eurasia.

The Global Times piece noted that if a stable government emerges in Afghanistan with international recognition, there is a possibility of including Afghanistan into CPEC. But it is also clear that the US would simply extend its
campaign of terror targeting CPEC in western Pakistan into Afghanistan to follow Chinese investments and infrastructure projects.

Pursuing Hegemony, Settling for Perpetual Instability

For a variety of reasons Washington’s most ambitious plans for Afghanistan were never realized, but extremism in Xinjiang and Baluchistan have nonetheless ebbed and flowed during the US occupation. So has extremism along Iran’s eastern borders. Central Asia had initially been pulled into Washington’s “anti-terrorism” agenda as part of the 2001 invasion and subsequent occupation, before incrementally over the years trying to minimize this unsolicited and unwelcomed relationship.

China’s rise and Russia’s reemergence over the last two decades has played a major role in foiling the most ambitious plans Washington had for Afghanistan. Like in Syria, the conditions on the ground that had two decades ago favored America’s style of aggressive foreign policy no longer exist.

In a supposedly “rules-based international order” where the only real demonstrable rule seems to be “might makes right,” the US finds itself no longer the “mightiest.”

Its capacity to continue destabilizing the region, however, by retrenching its position in Afghanistan from an overt, expensive, and ultimately ineffective military occupation to a much smaller and less noticeable covert footprint driving extremism within and beyond Afghanistan’s borders still persists.

It is not clear how, in the near and intermediate future Afghanistan’s neighbors can mitigate this threat. US-sponsored terrorism targeting CPEC in neighboring Pakistan still persists and will likely only worsen and spread to Afghanistan to follow Chinese infrastructure and economic investments.

In the long-term, real reconstruction and development in and around Afghanistan will drain the swamps of extremism the US will undoubtedly use in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives in the region.

The conundrum here is that covert and semi-covert US-sponsored extremism in the region, along with the threat of looming US sanctions on companies operating in Afghanistan, will all be aimed directly at genuine reconstruction and development projects to impede or entirely roll them back - just as the US is doing through covert violence everywhere from neighboring Pakistan, to Syria in the Middle East, to Southeast Asia’s Myanmar.

A security effort across all affected nations in the region would be required to stem this terrorism long enough for the sustainable benefits of economic development to drain the socioeconomic swamps fueling violence. But this will be a security effort added on top of existing crises being created by the US along Russia’s, Iran’s, and China’s peripheries from Eastern Europe, across the Middle East and North Africa, into Central and South Asia, to the encirclement of China and Russia to the far east through Southeast and East Asia.

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