Why China and Russia May Choose to Help the Taliban Government?

If there is one central reason that explains why Russia and China have decided to develop relations with the Taliban government in Afghanistan, it is the US inability to defeat and dismantle the terror networks that exist in Afghanistan today. Even after twenty years of fighting, the US retreated from Afghanistan without defeating the Taliban, al-Qaeda or the Islamic State in Khorasan (radical organizations that are banned in Russia). In fact, the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) developed in Afghanistan at a time when the US did have a formidable military and intelligence presence. The group flourished and staged sophisticated attacks in Afghanistan despite the combined military might of the US/NATO forces and the US-trained Afghan National Security Forces, as well as the CIA-funded militias. The fact that the US left Afghanistan in the lurch has made Afghanistan’s immediate neighbours – Russia and China, in particular – appraise the situation in ways that necessitates developing direct and normal ties with the Taliban, for not approaching the Taliban could very well spell disaster in the region. A widespread instability and infighting could allow transnational jihadi networks to spread into the region exporting their jihad from Afghanistan to the neighboring central, East and South Asia; hence, China’s appeal to the world to “actively guide” the Taliban government to avoid the looming disaster, a scenario that could very well destabilise its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

IS-K orchestrated Kabul airport attacks - which killed over a hundred Afghans and over a dozed US troops - and
subsequent US air strikes have only confirmed the fears of Russia and China about Afghanistan being a hotbed of competing jihadi ideologies; hence, the emerging Russia-China bloc to manage the Afghan debacle in ways that leaves minimum threat to deal with. As such, while China’s Xi said that Beijing was “willing to strengthen communication and co-ordination with the broader international community, including Russia, on the Afghan issue”, he was given a positive response from Russia when Putin said Russia was willing to “closely communicate” with China to “crack down on terrorism, cut off drug smuggling and prevent the spillover of security risks from Afghanistan” to safeguard stability in the region.

China’s message to the international community/the UNSC was the same when its ambassador said that

“it is necessary for all parties to make contact with the Taliban and guide it actively”, adding that “the international community should provide Afghanistan with urgently needed assistance for the economy, livelihood and humanitarian needs in order to help the new authority maintain the normal operations of governing institutions, maintain public order and stability, curb currency depreciation and price increase, and embark on the path of peaceful reconstruction as soon as possible.”

Therefore, Russia and China, unlike the US and EU, intend to remain engaged with Afghanistan. Its reason is not too difficult to understand. Unlike the US and the EU, the presence of transnational jihadi networks in Afghanistan poses a direct physical threat to Russia and China. While the UNSC report released in May showed that jihadi networks like al-Qaeda, East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and IS-K, continue to have a strong presence, there is very little confidence in their ability to carry out direct attacks in the US or the EU. On the other hand, their direct presence in Afghanistan not only poses a direct threat of instability to Russia/Central Asia and China, but that their success in orchestrating destabilisation could create a scenario in which they acquire the capability to carry out missions in the neighbouring countries.

It is for this reason that Russia and China have opposed the US decision to freeze Afghan central bank reserves currently held in the US. The decision, as it stands, is aimed at not allowing the Taliban to possess and utilise resources to offset any potential economic crisis. Given the US position vis-à-vis the Taliban, as also Russia and China, the US decision to freeze Afghan assets amounts to deliberately causing the Afghan economy to crash, making it impossible for the Taliban government to, for instance, pay the salaries, conduct international trade and/or control the rising inflation. A dwindling economy plus a broken administrative structure could create the necessary conditions suitable for transnational jihadi networks, who usually pay handsome salaries to their fighters, to find recruitments from within the unemployed and disgruntled youth.

China’s and Russia’s opposition to freezing Afghanistan’s assets shows that they are highly unlikely to adopt a coercive approach to Afghanistan, at least as long as the Taliban play by the rules they have themselves charted i.e., not allowing Afghan territory to be used as a base for transnational networks to stage terrorism in the neighbouring states.

Therefore, the so-called ‘common front’ of China and Russia in Afghanistan has clear and targeted objectives. While reports in the western mainstream media tend to portray the Sino-Russian front as essentially anti-American taking “advantage” of the US retreat, it remains that the broader contours of this engagement are informed mainly by the terrorist threat the present-day Afghanistan poses to the Chinese and the Russians, including the Central Asian States.

Therefore, the so-called Sino-Russian plan, as some reports in the western media indicate, is not aimed at filling in any ‘gaps’ left by the US; rather it is to prevent the ‘gap’ from being filled by the same terrorist groups that the US military failed to defeat in its twenty years of engagement.

Besides it, the nature of Russia and Chinese engagement is far from uncritical. Their officials are keen to stress that the extent to which they will actually engage with the Taliban depends crucially on how the Taliban themselves operate after establishing their government. As Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, said that Russia had not yet recognised the Taliban, adding that “This is the current priority. Firstly, we need to see how the de facto dominance of the Taliban manifests itself in real life.”

At the same time, both Russia and China are aware that following a western style total disengagement will produce a vicious cycle of violence and terrorism; hence, the need to support the Taliban to prevent yet another region-wide wave of terrorism.
Salman Rafi Sheikh, research-analyst of International Relations and Pakistan’s foreign and domestic affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.