

# China's power play in Afghanistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

Afghanistan's president Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (L) paying a state visit to China in October 2014 (Lintao Zhang/Getty Images) With American troops [pulling out of Afghanistan](#) as part of a wider long term US retreat from south and central Asia, China is waiting to fill the vacuum. It has brought regional countries together to encourage peace, invested in mineral and [oil extraction](#) in a country where hardly anyone else will invest a penny, and put pressure on its ally, Pakistan, to stop helping the Taliban. According to the Wall Street Journal, China even [hosted a delegation of Afghan Taliban officials](#) in December, "to discuss the possibility of opening talks with the Afghan government".

This is important for the west, which is in the middle of a strategic retreat from the region even though international terrorism is still a threat. China has never played such a diplomatic role outside its borders before and success in Afghanistan could conceivably encourage Beijing to play a more positive role with North Korea.

But does China have the incentive and the stamina for such a difficult role outside its borders — one that has in our lifetimes defeated the former Soviet Union and the US?

According to Sun Yuxi, China's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, China is not lacking in ambition. "Afghanistan is facing a critical period," he told me recently in London. "We are ready to do more, we want to play a bigger role. We would welcome the Taliban in any neutral venue such as in China. We will make negotiations happen but the process must be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led."

Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's president, [visited Beijing in late October](#) and asked China to play just such a role, [saying in a speech](#): "We count on the active engagement of the People's Republic of China in promoting peace, prosperity, and stability in Afghanistan and in the region". The hope is that where the US has failed, China will have the influence to persuade Pakistan to come on board and force the Pakistan-based Taliban leadership to open talks with Kabul.

China has been building support for a regional consensus on Afghanistan through a slew of group meetings, establishing a trilateral talking shop between [China, Pakistan and Afghanistan](#), and another one with the US. US officials say that Washington is [not averse](#) to a larger role for China in Afghanistan, if it can broker peace, keep out terrorists and help Afghanistan's economy.

In these respects, Beijing has interests that directly coincide with Washington. Of particular concern to China is the [national security threat](#) in its northwestern "autonomous region" of Xinjiang, which has seen a recent surge in riots and terrorist attacks. Some Islamic radicals belonging to the Uighur ethnic group have [trained with the Taliban](#) in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Beijing would like to ensure that such militants gain neither training nor protection within Taliban-controlled territory in the future.

The mineral and energy resources of Afghanistan are also a strong pull. Identified by the US, these went largely untapped due to the continuing civil war there. The larger strategy for Beijing is around economic development — including the construction of the Silk Road. China is investing billions of dollars in a road and rail transportation network stretching [from western China to Germany](#), crossing dozens of countries. It wants to build a railway in Afghanistan [to carry minerals to China](#) and a four lane highway from Gwadar port on the Arabian Gulf crossing the length of Pakistan and arriving on the Chinese border.

Pakistan's prime minister Nawaz Sharif has already signed up to "economic corridor" projects with China amounting to [\\$45bn over a decade](#). This could change the map of the region, but it also implies that the Pakistan army is ready to clamp down on jihadist groups fighting in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

Economic aid and money is the ultimate lure for both Pakistan and Afghanistan, and it is this that gives China a fighting chance of settling a region that has seen nothing but war since the [Soviet invasion of Afghanistan](#) in 1979. The US failed to build a sustainable economy in Afghanistan or convince Pakistan's army to stop backing extremism. China's own economic plans and demand for raw materials could finally give Afghanistan and Pakistan a financial bonanza and provide the incentive to end state support for extremist violence in both countries. For any fragile nation state it's a once in a lifetime opportunity. Whether both nations will grasp it is still an open question.