



Afghanistan is the Graveyard of Great Power Competition

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As the Taliban resurrects its Islamic Emirate, the United States is once again facing the likelihood of terrorist groups operating at will within Afghanistan. Publicly, the Biden administration is downplaying the threat to the American homeland. "They know what happened the last time they harbored a terrorist group that attacked the United States," Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently warned. And in private, President Joe Biden is relying on a great power to keep the threat in check—but it's not the United States.

On Aug. 16, Blinken conferred with the People's Republic of China (PRC) State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi about Afghanistan. The State Department readout from the call was a single sentence that made oblique references to "developments" and "the security situation." China's summary of the call, by contrast, was 22 paragraphs long. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry account of the conversation, Blinken expressed "hope that China will also play an important role" in stabilizing Afghanistan.

Did he? China's "Wolf Warrior" diplomats lie as a matter of course. One need look no further than ham-fisted conspiracy theories about COVID-19's origins and photoshopped images of fictional war crimes for some particularly egregious examples. But, in this case, Wang's account squares with vague references from Blinken's deputy, Wendy Sherman, about the interests Washington and Beijing share in Afghanistan.

Those are borne of necessity. With America's military footprint now virtually nonexistent, and with Washington maintaining precious little leverage over the Afghan militant movement, the White House now has no choice but to rely on the PRC to police the Taliban.

To put a finer point on it: Biden is relying on Washington's foremost great power adversary to prevent America's next 9/11. It is broken policy and bungled strategy, but—short of reinvading Kabul—Biden has left himself with no other options.

To be sure, China has no interest in seeing terror groups thriving in Afghanistan either. Insurgents in neighboring Pakistan have repeatedly targeted China's high-profile construction projects in the region—such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), into which Beijing would like to integrate Afghanistan. The PRC is also currently eyeing Afghanistan's rich mineral deposits.

But the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also has a cynical motive for working with the Taliban: advancing the genocide of its Uyghur Muslim minority. Beijing regularly references the "Three Evils" of terrorism, separatism and religious extremism to paint all Uyghurs as terrorists, and has long pointed to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as proof. China's concerns about ETIM are specious at best, and have been for some time, but that didn't stop Wang from pressuring Blinken to reverse a Trump administration decision to de-list ETIM as a terrorist group. According to Wang's account, Blinken left the door open to the possibility.

If Biden does so, he would hand an enormous propaganda victory to the CCP. But even if the administration holds fast on ETIM, it may have little choice but to placate Beijing in other ways. On Aug. 29, Blinken spoke with Wang about "holding the Taliban accountable." Wang replied with a laundry list of demands.

It apparently hasn't escaped Beijing's notice that Biden has been going soft for months. In June, Biden let a handful of Chinese solar panel companies off the hook for using Uyghur slave labor, in order to protect his climate agenda. In July, the president declined to sanction the Chinese cyber espionage group Hafnium for hacking Microsoft because politicians in Brussels and London didn't want to upset Beijing. Most recently, the administration curiously handed an economic lifeline to Huawei, a nominally private PRC tech company with an espionage and sanctions-busting rap sheet.

All of Biden's talk about "serious competition" and "extreme competition" with Beijing is meaningless apart from an actual commitment to counter the CCP. But that's all a moot point now. Because of Biden's bungled exit from Kabul, America's China policy is now subject to Beijing's veto. In his haste to leave the graveyard of empires, Biden has killed great power competition.

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