

The Empire Strikes Back: China Returns to Afghanistan

by Geoffrey Clarfield



If you read the North American and European press, you will get the impression that the Chinese have, geopolitically, reached their westernmost geographical limit in offering themselves as the new patrons of Afghanistan. It's a bold strike against China's NATO competitors, who have left, or who have been driven out of Afghanistan by the Taliban. And so, China is making the new government of Taliban rulers in Afghanistan its tributary, or client state.

The Taliban do not have money and look to the Chinese for aid and investment because the only shrewd and right thing the U.S. government did before its panicked retreat from Afghanistan was to ensure that the gold of Afghanistan and its currency reserves were safely in a vault in or around New York City. From these funds, no doubt, the Biden administration is now offering its first sixty-four million dollars of "development assistance," or perhaps ransom money, to that self-declared Islamic dictatorship. We can be sure that the Taliban will use these funds to empower women and protect ethnic minorities.

Despite the hybrid and contorted Marxism of today's ruling Communist Party of China, the Chinese and their leaders are a country and people with a long historical memory, at least 2,500 years of it. It is common Chinese practice to look at the present through the lens of the past. And so, Chinese people are well aware that they once ruled or at least lorded it over Afghanistan, for at least about one hundred years.

This was during the period of the Tang Dynasty, whose imperial

rulers of the Tang Empire (618–907) controlled a landmass that began in the Pacific and reached the Hindu Kush in the west. During that time, what is today Afghanistan, Pakistan, and much of Northern India was part of a series of sophisticated, urbane, and literate Buddhist cultures.

At the time, the area was a world center of Buddhist scholarship and teaching. Its artisans and sculptors were the creators of the massive Buddhist rock sculptures of the Bamiyan valley in Afghanistan, which were blown up by the iconoclastic Afghan Taliban on the 21st of February, 2001.

During the seventh century A.D., a traveling monk from China knew that the texts and the teaching of Buddhism were purer in the Afghan and Indian monasteries, and so Chinese Buddhist monk and pilgrim Xuan Zang (602–664) walked from China to Afghanistan, India, and back, after having spent years studying Sanskrit and collecting Buddhist manuscripts, which he then brought back to China.

The emperor of China at the time welcomed him home, subsidized his translation work, rewarded him highly, and thus triggered yet another and one of the more substantial waves of Buddhist influence on the Chinese people, an imported religion that has waxed and waned there until the present day.

All literate Chinese know about Xuan Zang, and he is still a national hero. So, from a Chinese historical and political perspective, they are not replacing the Americans in today's Afghanistan. They actually feel that they are simply and justly re-asserting their manifest destiny in a land they once ruled, just before the rise of Islam destroyed every vestige of Buddhist civilization in and around the Hindu Kush.

During the sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen hundreds, the Chinese empire began to shrink. It suffered losses against the Russians to the west and northeast and to the Western Europeans, who occupied its eastern coast, where they created

independent enclaves.

Nevertheless, in the late nineteenth century, the Chinese empire reasserted itself in eastern central Asia and conquered the Uighur Turkish-speaking Muslims who have dominated the Sinkiang region for centuries. This became China's unruly "Muslim wild west" and is a sore spot in the national consciousness and the foreign policy establishment in China.

The Uighurs of Sinkiang have witnessed the successful disengagement from the Soviet Union (since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991) of most Central Asian peoples and republics, who comprise Turkish- and Persian-speaking Muslim townspeople, farmers, and nomads. They reasserted their Muslim identities and religious practices after the enforcement of Russian-dominated Marxist secular governments during the previous seventy years (that is, from the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990).

They are therefore sympathetic to their ethnic, linguistic, and religious Turkish-speaking cousins and co-religionists, the Uighurs of Sinkiang, who would like to break away from China and create an additional Central Asian Turkish-speaking state based on Islam. At least four hundred thousand Uighurs have fled persecution in Sinkiang and have crossed over to neighbouring Kazakhstan so that they can live more freely. The Chinese will have none of this.

The first thing the Chinese have done is drown the Turkish-speaking Uighur Muslims with secular, Christian, Buddhist, Confucian, or Taoist Chinese Han immigrants, which is the dominant Chinese ethnic group. After the communist revolution in China in 1948, one year later, the Han population of Sinkiang numbered 300,000 people. By the year 2000, of the 7.8 million people living in Sinkiang, more than 40% were Han Chinese, an increase of 2,200% over a mere half-century.

The local Uighurs have been treated to a carrot-and-stick approach by their Chinese overlords: increased investment in infrastructure, linking Sinkiang with its "Silk Road" initiative, alongside merciless persecution of any political resistance to Chinese domination.

In 2018, Human Rights Watch published a report on Chinese behavior in Sinkiang. This paragraph distills the report:

Inside political education camps, detainees are forced to learn Mandarin Chinese, sing praises of the Chinese Communist Party, and memorize rules applicable primarily to Turkic Muslims. Those outside the camps are required to attend weekly, or even daily, Chinese flag-raising ceremonies, political indoctrination meetings, and at times Mandarin classes. Detainees are told they may not be allowed to leave the camps unless they have learned over 1,000 Chinese characters or are otherwise deemed to have become loyal Chinese subjects; Turkic Muslims living outside are subjected to movement restrictions ranging from house arrest, to being barred from leaving their locales, to being prevented from leaving the country. Inside, people are punished for peacefully practicing religion; outside, the government's religious restrictions are so stringent that it has effectively outlawed Islam. Inside, people are closely watched by guards and are barred from contacting their families and friends. Those living in their homes are watched by their neighbors, officials, and tech-enabled mass surveillance systems, and are not allowed to contact those in foreign countries.

At the same time, the Chinese have established working groups such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which comprise China and most of the newly independent states of Central Asia. The SCO has become one vehicle for aid, investment, diplomacy, and security, linking China's stand against radical Islam in central Asia with its anti-terror

metaphor for its suppression of the Uighurs. This has, for example, included the Chinese National Petroleum company gaining ownership of 60% of gas-producing companies like Aktobemunaygaz in Kazakhstan.

Simply put, China is building roads, creating air links, flooding the central Asian markets with Chinese manufactured goods, and creating a security and intelligence network that ensures that its Central Asian neighbors will not challenge it in Sinkiang. This is close to the kind of thinking of the Tang emperors who through trade (gifts/bribes), luxury goods, and military domination ensured Han dominance of Central Asia for a period.

The Chinese have done and continue to do all they can to offset the influence that NATO has created with the central Asian republics, slowly bringing them within the NATO umbrella, a policy until recently pushed most aggressively by the U.S., while also keeping Russia at bay, which conquered Central Asia during the 19th century until driven out in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union.

And so, we must conclude that despite the new Afghanistan's radical Islamic agenda, it is unlikely that the Taliban will engage in a jihad to free their "Muslim brothers in Sinkiang." Like the rest of their "brothers" in the Islamic world, they will gladly ignore the destruction of the Uyghur people and nation so that they may feather their own nests and increase their share in the China-driven Silk Road initiative.

The Chinese, who have been the off-and-on imperialists of Central Asia for centuries, will know how to insulate themselves from the Taliban through their Central Asian quid pro quo.

The Chinese Communist Party cadres are laughing all the way to the mineral riches of Afghanistan, which they will exploit mercilessly while sticking it to Russia and the West. The

empire strikes back.

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