

China, the United States, and the question of Afghanistan
March 18th, 2015

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Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
Hearing: Looking West: China and Central Asia

For many years, US attempts to encourage China to play a constructive role in stabilizing Afghanistan were met with staunch opposition. Not only did Beijing resist any form of cooperation with the United States there, it sought to limit its own involvement in Afghanistan, and was at best a second tier actor among the powers who were influencing the country's future path. Chinese policy is now in a new phase. The US drawdown has concentrated minds in Beijing, and China's anxiety about the security implications in the aftermath are drawing it into increasingly active efforts to help forge a political settlement. After a long period in which China's approach to Afghanistan was a source of frustration, this is now one of the rare areas of foreign policy where the United States and China largely see eye-to-eye.

China and Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been an issue of strategic salience for China only when it has perceived a clear security threat there, either the military presence of a strategic rival or the risk of Islamic militancy spilling over into Xinjiang. Until recently, the two periods in which Afghanistan loomed large in Chinese thinking were during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, when China provided substantial arms supplies for the mujahideen's campaign, and in the late 1990s, when the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) was given the freedom to set up training camps there under Taliban rule. At other times, Afghanistan has been treated as largely peripheral to China's strategic calculus. China has not been seriously invested in the country, politically or economically, and the small, remote border between the two countries has remained closed. During certain stretches of time, particularly the 1990s, Beijing was effectively willing to outsource the management of its interests there to its closest partner in the region, Pakistan.

In the decade after 9/11, China had two main security concerns. The first was geopolitical: that the United States might establish permanent bases in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The second was the non-conventional threat: that a victory for the insurgency would have a radicalizing effect in Xinjiang and provide the conditions under which safe havens for Uighur militants in Afghanistan could be re-established. When it came to political and security matters China therefore chose to sit on the sidelines rather than providing any materially significant backing to either side. Beijing did seek to take advantage of

the opportunities for resource investments in Afghanistan, but for an assortment of reasons, its largest economic commitment, the \$3.5 billion Aynak copper mine deal, has never gone into operation.

Since President Obama's announcement in 2011 of plans for a drawdown of US forces, the sense of geopolitical threat has largely receded. Instead, China's fear of a messy aftermath to the US withdrawal has become its principal concern. With the terrorism threat in China escalating in the period since 2008, particularly in the last eighteen months, which have seen attacks moving beyond Xinjiang and into major Chinese cities, the importance of containing extremist influences in the Chinese periphery has grown significantly. The major strategic economic initiatives since Xi Jinping took office, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, are perceived to be threatened by instability in Afghanistan. As a result, in the period since late-2011 Beijing has invested steadily increasing political energies in Afghanistan, whether by way of its bilateral relationship with the Afghan government, its regional diplomacy (most importantly with Pakistan), its coordination with the United States, or its contacts with the Taliban.

China's heightened interest in Afghanistan was given a notable public demonstration by Zhou Yongkang's visit to Kabul in September 2012, the first by a Politburo Standing Committee member in decades. But Beijing waited for Afghanistan's elections in April 2014 before it was really willing to invest its political capital. China appointed a special envoy for Afghanistan, former Ambassador Sun Yuxi, in July 2014 and went on to host the "Heart of Asia" ministerial in October 2014, the only time it has acted as the host for a major multilateral gathering on Afghanistan. The conference was of particular importance for its timing, coming immediately after the new government had taken office, and just as the West's commitments were being drawn down. China was Ashraf Ghani's first formal overseas destination as president.

The October meeting was also notable for China's offer to act as mediator for talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, an offer later made public by the Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, during his visit to Pakistan in February 2015. China has been engaged in intense diplomatic efforts with the Afghan government, the Taliban, Pakistan, the United States, and other important powers, to try to create the preconditions for a reconciliation process. If peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban do move ahead, the principal cause will be the dramatically improved relations between Kabul and Rawalpindi, but China has also played an important background role.

The last couple of years have seen Beijing convening an array of bilateral and trilateral meetings on and with Afghanistan, in particular including Pakistan, India, Russia, and the United States, although Afghanistan has also featured in

Chinese talks with the Gulf States, Iran, and the Central Asian states. China's main objective has been to forge a degree of consensus between powers whose rivalries in Afghanistan have been one of the main reasons that the country has stayed at war. Most importantly, China has employed a mix of pressure and persuasion with Pakistan in order to encourage it to facilitate talks rather than act as a spoiler. China has made it clear that it wants its "all weather friend" to take into account Beijing's strong interest in seeing a stable political settlement in Afghanistan, while providing the reassurance that an enlarged Chinese role in the arrangements over Afghanistan's future is one of the ways to guarantee that Pakistan's interests there will be fully accommodated.

China has also expanded its direct contacts with the Taliban. China's relationship with the Taliban goes back to the days of its rule in Afghanistan, when the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, became the first senior representative of a non-Muslim country to meet with Mullah Omar. At the time, China sought to ensure that the Taliban would no longer provide carte blanche for ETIM to operate in Afghanistan, while the isolated Taliban regime wanted Chinese backing at the UN, political recognition, and economic support. Although the agreement reached left the two sides only partially satisfied, it laid the foundations for a relationship that persists to this day. Some Chinese officials claim that China has been the only country other than Pakistan to maintain continuous contact with the Quetta Shura, the Taliban's leadership council in exile. Both sides have seen value in continuing ties: China to ensure that the Taliban do not extend backing to Uighur militants and that its investments are not attacked, and the Taliban to gain a measure of tacit political recognition, financial assistance and even weapons supplies. Chinese-made HN-5 anti-aircraft missiles, landmines, rocket-propelled grenades, components for roadside bombs, and armor-piercing ammunition have all been deployed by the Taliban on the battlefield.

Direct Chinese contacts with the Taliban have increased markedly over the last year. Previously, most of its meetings with the Taliban and Taliban intermediaries took place in Pakistan, largely in Peshawar. More recently, the bulk of the meetings have been with representatives of the Taliban's Qatar office, which would provide the lead for any future talks with the Afghan government. These meetings included a publicly confirmed visit to Beijing from Qari Din Mohammad Hanif, a former Taliban minister, as well as other non-publicized meetings in Doha, Islamabad, and Beijing.

China's offer to Pakistan, the Afghan government and the Taliban has also been an economic one. All sides stand to gain significant benefits by way of Chinese investment if a lasting peace can be secured. This includes the \$45.6 billion China-Pakistan economic corridor, which will require some degree of regional

stability to realize. Economic interests have been one of the main topics addressed in China's meetings with the Taliban.

Whether or not China ends up playing a direct mediating role in the reconciliation process itself remains to be seen, and at the time of writing there is still the prospect that talks will not move ahead at all. But China has undoubtedly played a significant role in getting them close to the starting line.

Chinese interests

Security interests continue to dominate Chinese thinking about Afghanistan. The principal security focus is to prevent the establishment of safe havens for Uighur militants, and associated concerns about the impact of rising militancy and a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan for Xinjiang. China is also keen to avoid various spillover effects: the potentially destabilizing impact of intensifying war in Afghanistan on Pakistan, its quasi-ally; the risks that proxy wars between Pakistan and India in Afghanistan will result in conflict in South Asia too; and the impact of instability on its broader economic interests in the region. Narcotics flows from Afghanistan are a further, secondary security concern. While China has a decent working relationship with the Taliban it does not want to see them occupy a dominant role in the country. Whatever deals Beijing can make with the leadership, it still sees the risk of a Taliban "victory" as an ideological and practical threat to its interests in Xinjiang.

China's direct economic interests in Afghanistan weigh less heavily. China is often described as Afghanistan's largest investor but this would only be true if its one grand-scale economic project, the China Metallurgical Group Corporation's (MCC) copper mine in Logar province were to be realized at something close to its original contract terms. Instead, political and security considerations have meant that it is not even close to beginning activities, and MCC has made ongoing attempts to renegotiate the contract to strip out many of the commitments to infrastructure development that it had originally agreed to take on. For an assortment of reasons, CNPC's more modest investment in the Amu Darya oil field has also stalled. In the event of peace in Afghanistan, Chinese economic involvement in the country would increase exponentially but its existing activities are not really motivating its policy - with commodities markets in their present state, a large copper mine is not quite as appealing as it was back in 2007 anyway. The new government has sought to draw China into investments in cross-border projects, particularly between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and into the development of a national infrastructure plan, as a way of embedding the country more closely in Chinese broader economic plans for the region. For now though, Beijing's direct economic interests in Afghanistan are more aspirational than real.

Central Asia is also connected to Chinese interests in Afghanistan in a few respects. Most of the flows of militants, narcotics, and weapons between Afghanistan and China, as well as from Pakistan's tribal belt, go through Central Asian states rather than directly across the Afghanistan or Pakistan borders. Uighur militants are typically hosted by Central Asian militant groups, principally the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Central Asia is one of the principal arteries for the Silk Road Economic Belt, which risks being disrupted by broader instability emanating from Afghanistan. Central Asian states are closely involved in some of the main multilateral processes for dealing with Afghanistan, such as the "Heart of Asia" process and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Policies towards Afghanistan and Central Asia do therefore have threads in common, but there are important aspects of China's Afghanistan policy that are channeled through the prism of Pakistan and its South Asia policy.

China's security engagement with Afghanistan

A spectrum of Chinese government entities have been involved in security cooperation with Afghanistan. The tone for this was set by Zhou Yongkang's visit in 2011, wearing his hat as China's security chief and accompanied by a delegation of security and party officials. The Ministry of State Security (MSS) in particular has taken an important role in dealing with Afghanistan, and intelligence cooperation between the two sides has moved forward considerably in the last few years. The State Councilor responsible for public security, Guo Shengkun, made a prominent visit to Afghanistan in November 2014, and a month before that, Qi Jianguo, the PLA Deputy Chief of the General Staff with responsibility for foreign affairs and intelligence, made a less publicized visit. China has long been heavily reliant on Pakistan for its intelligence in the region and the Afghan government has sought, with some success, to position itself as a valuable additional resource for addressing Chinese security concerns in the region. Chinese intelligence officers, rather than diplomats, have taken the principal role in maintaining contacts with the Taliban, including the recent rounds of talks. The Chinese intelligence services - 2PLA as well as the MSS - are the greatest repository of expertise and experience on Afghanistan in the Chinese system, going back to their operations in the 1980s, and will likely continue to play a leading role in bilateral relations. Even some of the senior Chinese diplomats working on Afghanistan now either have backgrounds in intelligence or have occupied important intelligence liaison roles. This reflects the fact that in Afghanistan, China is still overwhelmingly focused on counter-terrorism issues, as well as the fact that, over several decades, Beijing has had to navigate so many important, and sensitive relationships outside formal government channels.

China has provided training for limited numbers of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) personnel and Afghan police, largely in counter-narcotics and mine clearance, and will be expanding its programs in the coming years, focusing in particular on counter-terrorism training. In 2014, China pledged \$330 million in aid for the period to 2017, and committed to provide professional training for 3,000 Afghans, which will include programs on the security side. China is also moving forward with the supply of very modest levels of military equipment, including a publicly announced \$1 million donation to the Ministry of the Interior in 2014, and is exploring relatively non-sensitive ways in which it might further expand its equipment contribution to the ANSF. China's principal advantage in its security engagement in Afghanistan is that it is seen as a relatively neutral actor by all the different parties to the conflict, and can undertake many of these initiatives without provoking the level of suspicion that dogs so many training and support programs from outside powers. For now, direct security cooperation is limited precisely by the fact that China does not want to be seen to be backing one party to the conflict too actively, but in the event of a political settlement, it is likely that Chinese bilateral security assistance could be scaled up considerably.

US-China cooperation

For a number of years, US efforts to solicit China's cooperation in Afghanistan met stonewalling from Beijing. Not only did China not want to help facilitate a long-term US military presence so close to its western border but it feared that being seen to cooperate with the United States would make it a militant target. Even the most modest proposals for bilateral cooperation, such as supplying books to schools, were deemed too problematic. Talks between the two sides were frustrating, as was China's total reluctance to play even the most modest role diplomatic or economic role in Afghanistan - the stalling of Chinese investment projects meant that it was not even providing useful revenue to the Afghan government.

Nowadays that aversion has gone. In the period since 2011, China and the United States have become more closely aligned in their interests and objectives, and cooperation has moved forward to such an extent that it is perhaps the foreign policy issue on which the two sides are in closest sync. China's foreign minister has publicly described Afghanistan as a "new highlight" of Sino-US cooperation. There have been some symbolic bilateral initiatives, such as a program for joint training of Afghan diplomats, but these are of far less importance than the discreet pattern of coordination that has emerged between the two sides. This is symbolized by the fact that a new US-China-Afghanistan trilateral, agreed during President Obama's visit to Beijing for the APEC meeting in October, will be the only such trilateral of its nature that exists between the United States and China. Chinese officials have met regularly with US

counterparts to exchange information, and coordinate on important meetings and policy initiatives, including China's push on the reconciliation issue. The two sides have a basic level of agreement on the need to see a stable outcome in Afghanistan after the drawdown of US troops, and the need to ensure that the Taliban do not play a dominant role in the country's future. While in the past the nominally shared interest in "stability" was only one of a number of Chinese objectives, which might be trumped by Beijing's interest in seeing a US exit from Afghanistan, this is no longer the case. Even when it comes to US troop presence, China actively encouraged former President Karzai to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement with the United States, and has - if anything - been seeking to ensure that the drawdown does not take place with undue haste.

This does not mean that the two sides agree on all issues. There is a clear values gap, for instance, when it comes to matters such as the treatment of Uighurs. Beijing's blurring of the lines between terrorism and legitimate political activity means that certain forms of intelligence and information sharing are impossible, largely to China's disadvantage. There are a number of genuine Uighur militants though, some of whom have held leadership roles in Al Qaeda, and were specifically targeted in US drone strikes. China's extremely narrow focus on Uighur militancy, rather than its operating environment, has often meant that it was happy to see the US remain the number one target for various other militant groups, and to fix deals with them, as long as China could keep out of their crosshairs. Elements of this approach are starting to shift though, demonstrated by China's efforts to encourage the Pakistani army to conduct operations in North Waziristan, as well as its newfound willingness to play an active - and politically risky - role on strategic-level issues in Afghanistan.

China is also more sympathetic to Pakistan's position than the United States, including being keener to ensure that India's role in Afghanistan does not grow - from the Pakistani perspective - uncomfortably large. Even here though, Beijing has sought to reassure India that the two sides share concerns about Afghanistan's future situation and militancy in the region; that China's political efforts will benefit India too; and that China, to a greater extent than Pakistan, sees India's economic and political role in Afghanistan as conducive to the country's stability.

At times, China has been accused of free-riding on the US presence in Afghanistan. The one sense in which this is true is that it did not make meaningful economic, political or security contributions to stability in Afghanistan during some of the most critical phases of the US-led war there. But China did not extract any real economic benefits from Afghanistan during this period either. Moreover, China is likelier to expand its economic activities further in the aftermath of US withdrawal, provided the right political conditions exist. China

has wanted to see security for its investments in the country but it has not relied exclusively on Afghan government, NATO or US troops to provide it: it has also sought arrangements with insurgent forces, both at the local level and at the leadership level, to ensure that there are no major attacks on its facilities.

More importantly, China is now undoubtedly doing some genuine diplomatic heavy-lifting on Afghanistan, with the potential to have a more consequential security impact than any other conceivable role that it might take on. It is unclear that a Chinese security presence in Afghanistan, for instance, would be particularly helpful at present. Neither would overly visible US-China cooperation: both sides' interests are better served by ensuring coordinated, complementary positions on issues of mutual importance.

In the long term it is entirely possible that Afghanistan will be enveloped into the broader pattern of strategic competition that has emerged between China and the United States across much of Asia. But the picture to China's west does look different in important ways from the picture to the east, given the premium that both sides place on stabilizing this region, and Beijing's growing concern about the domestic implications of rising militancy. In the short-to-medium term at least, despite some continued differences, China's enlarged role appears to be largely constructive when it comes to US security interests in the region. We have been here before: in the 1980s, the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan was probably the two sides' closest area of security cooperation in a third area. This appears to be another period in which shared views on a common threat is producing an unusual level of alignment.