

# China and Afghanistan After the NATO Withdrawal

Richard Weitz



November 2015  
Edited by David Cohen

The JAMESTOWN  
FOUNDATION

# **China and Afghanistan After the NATO Withdrawal**

**By**

**Richard Weitz**

November 2015



**Edited by David Cohen**

Published in the United States by  
The Jamestown Foundation  
1111 16th Street NW Suite 320  
Washington, DC 20036  
<http://www.jamestown.org>  
Copyright © The Jamestown Foundation, November 2015

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this report may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written consent. For copyright and permissions information, contact The Jamestown Foundation, 1111 16th Street NW, Suite 320, Washington, DC 20036.

The views expressed in this report are those of the contributing authors and not necessarily those of The Jamestown Foundation. The report was written by Dr. Richard Weitz and edited by David Cohen, former Editor of *China Brief*.

For more information on this report or the Jamestown Foundation, email [pubs@jamestown.org](mailto:pubs@jamestown.org).



## **Jamestown's Mission**

The Jamestown Foundation's mission is to inform and educate policymakers and the broader policy community about events and trends in those societies which are strategically or tactically important to the United States and which frequently restrict access to such information. Utilizing indigenous and primary sources, Jamestown's material is delivered without political bias, filter or agenda. It is often the only source of information which should be, but is not always, available through official or intelligence channels, especially in regard to Eurasia and terrorism.

## **Origins**

Launched in 1984 after Jamestown's late president and founder William Geimer's work with Arkady Shevchenko, the highest-ranking Soviet official ever to defect when he left his position as undersecretary general of the United Nations, the Jamestown Foundation rapidly became the leading source of information about the inner workings of closed totalitarian societies.

Over the past two decades, Jamestown has developed an extensive global network of such experts—from the Black Sea to Siberia, from the Persian Gulf to the Pacific. This core of intellectual talent includes former high-ranking government officials and military officers, political scientists, journalists, scholars and economists. Their insight contributes significantly to policymakers engaged in addressing today's new and emerging global threats, including that from international terrorists.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>pg. 6</b>
<b>I. Key Findings.....</b>	<b>pg. 7</b>
<b>II. Executive Summary.....</b>	<b>pg. 8</b>
<b>III. Introduction.....</b>	<b>pg. 10</b>
<b>IV. Part I: Chinese Interests in Afghanistan.....</b>	<b>pg. 12</b>
<b>V. Part II: China's Afghan Strategy: Tactics, Techniques and Troubles.....</b>	<b>pg. 25</b>
<b>VI. Concluding Observations.....</b>	<b>pg. 40</b>

## **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Haris Kalajdzic, Richard Ghiasy, Jeff Gibson, Man Ching Lam, Zihao Liu, Yejin Jin, Janko Šćepanović, Yue Sheng, Armin Tadayon, Albert Troszczynski, Su Wang, Mengqian Zha and Stella Ran Zheng for their assistance with this report.

## KEY FINDINGS

- *China has important, though not critical, security and economic interests related to Afghanistan*
- *China sees growing threats to its still modest interests in Afghanistan*
- *China wants foreign partners to assume the financial and security burdens of supporting Afghanistan's economic recovery and security*
- *Pakistan presents opportunities as well as challenges for China's Afghan strategy*
- *China has come to see the U.S.-NATO military assistance to Afghanistan as supporting its interests*
- *Neither Americans nor Afghans have strongly challenged what some see as Chinese free riding*
- *China is keeping its future options open*



## Executive Summary

Chinese policymakers have conflicting sentiments regarding the planned NATO military withdrawal from Afghanistan. PRC officials have expressed their commitment to collaborate with the international community to promote political stability, social progress and economic development in Afghanistan. They want Chinese firms to secure access to Afghanistan's natural resources and build the economic infrastructure needed to bring them to China. Beijing stresses its opposition to all types of terrorism and supports the National Development Strategy in Afghanistan, which aims to reduce the underlying socioeconomic causes of terrorism. At the international level, Chinese officials support having the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the United Nations and other multinational organizations play some role in Afghanistan. But the Chinese government has declined to contribute combat forces or logistical assistance to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF), and has refused to commit to support any NATO-led follow-on force. Beijing's reluctance to side openly with NATO in Afghanistan reflects a fear of antagonizing the Taliban, which could retaliate against China's growing economic interests in Afghanistan and perhaps again stir up trouble among China's Muslim minority.

In this context, many Chinese officials and academics are not greatly disappointed to see the United States and other Western governments remove their military forces from a country that borders China's sensitive western frontiers. They fault NATO for failing to finish off the Taliban despite conducting a decade-long counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan. They are also highly critical of NATO's inability to prevent the massive increase in the export of Afghan narcotics since 2001. PRC commentators continue to express concern about long-term U.S. ambitions in the region. On balance, however, fears that the United States is trying to use its military presence in Afghanistan to help construct a region-wide containment strategy against the PRC have declined, while anxieties about Western schemes to dump the Afghan security problem on Beijing's lap have grown. While most Chinese strategists want NATO forces to depart Afghanistan at some point, they fear that the withdrawal may be premature. Chinese analysts recognize that, during the past decade, NATO forces have helped suppress the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other Eurasian-based terrorist movements that at times have attempted to subvert Beijing-friendly regimes in Central Asia and supported Uyghur militants seeking to end Beijing's control over Xinjiang. The United States has also generously supported Pakistan, Beijing's closest ally in Eurasia, with billions of dollars of economic and military assistance. This aid has considerably exceeded the sums China has provided, or wants to provide, Pakistan. PRC officials and academics also worry that the withdrawal of NATO forces could make Chinese investment in Afghanistan more vulnerable to attacks by the Taliban or other extremist or criminal groups. A resurgence of regional terrorism and instability would also threaten to disrupt the oil and natural gas that flows from and through Central Asian countries into China. Growing economic ties with Central Asia have proven particularly beneficial for Xinjiang, which borders several Central Asian countries. Beijing has made the economic development of Xinjiang a priority, believing that rising living standards will weaken ethnic tensions.

Chinese commentators have shown scant interest in sending military forces to support or replace the current NATO mission or increasing their own economic aid levels to compensate for declining Western assistance. Yet while PRC policymakers naturally wish to maintain their low profile in Afghanistan, such an option is vanishing. They are now considering how to keep Beijing's costs and commitments modest while preventing the emergence of a dangerous security and institutional vacuum. Excluding a complete Taliban defeat, China's preferred outcome is a negotiated peace settlement among the Afghan government, the Taliban and the other Afghan combatants, supported by Afghanistan's neighboring countries and the great powers. These international partners would agree to preserve Afghanistan's neutrality from foreign military alliances and collectively contribute to the country's political development and economic reconstruction. This scenario would establish a more favorable environment for PRC investment in Afghanistan, reduce some sources of regional terrorism and narcotics trafficking, and facilitate use of Afghanistan's territory as part of the Afghan-Pakistan-Central Asian "Silk Road" connecting China's trade and investment with the rest of Eurasia and Europe. PRC foreign policy has traditionally dealt with Afghanistan and Pakistan individually, through bilateral channels, and has resisted the kind of Afghan-Pakistan linkage used for a while in the current administration. Chinese policymakers would prefer that the Taliban have as little influence as possible in Afghanistan, but if the Taliban again becomes an influential actor in that country, then Beijing will likely rely on their Pakistani security contacts to influence the Taliban to respect Chinese interests in Afghanistan and not support Uyghur or other anti-Beijing terrorism.

## Introduction

China has had long-standing, if modest, ties with Afghanistan. Material, cultural, and spiritual exchanges between China and Afghanistan occurred along the Silk Road, which was opened during the reign of Han Dynasty Emperor Wu, around 140 B.C. Depending on the ability of succeeding Chinese dynasties to maintain the trade route, these large-scale exchanges rose and fell, but they largely persisted until about the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when China's economic and political interactions came to rely more on oceanic routes. Afghanistan established formal diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1955, making it one of the first countries to switch recognition from the Nationalist government on Taiwan to the new PRC regime in Beijing. Two years later, Premier Zhou Enlai became the first Chinese leader to visit Afghanistan. Later that year, Afghan Prime Minister Mohammad Daud reciprocated by traveling to China. In 1963, the two countries signed a joint Boundary Agreement. In July 1973, the PRC recognized "the Republic of Afghanistan" declared by former Prime Minister Mohammad Daud after he deposed the King. The PRC offered similar recognition to the new "Democratic Republic of Afghanistan" established following a coup by the pro-Moscow faction in Kabul in 1978, though bilateral relations soon frayed when the new Afghan government started criticizing various Chinese policies opposed by Moscow.

When the Soviet Union deployed tens of thousands of combat troops in Afghanistan during the 1980s to help the beleaguered Kabul government suppress a popular uprising against its un-Islamic policies, the Chinese government played an active, if low-keyed, role in assisting the armed resistance, providing weapons and training in collaboration with the United States and Chinese ally Pakistan, where most of the insurgents were based.<sup>1</sup> The PRC refused to recognize the new government established by Moscow in Kabul and did not normalize relations with Afghanistan until 1992, when the Afghan insurgents succeeded in capturing Kabul and establishing a new "Islamic State of Afghanistan." After the guerrilla factions began fighting among themselves for power, the PRC in February 1993 withdrew its embassy staff from Kabul. The Chinese never established formal relations with the Taliban government that emerged several years later, and did not reopen its Kabul embassy until February 2002, but PRC representatives used China's close ties with Pakistan to maintain channels of communication with the Taliban, well as to monitor developments in Afghanistan. Pakistani intelligence services, the Taliban's creator and main foreign state sponsor, were especially valuable to China in this regard.

Political ties between the PRC and the new government of Afghanistan have developed well. Newly appointed Interim Prime Minister Hamid Karzai visited Beijing in January 2002, meeting President Jiang Zemin. He returned as Afghan President in 2006, and signed a bilateral treaty of friendship and cooperation, which Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan said indicated that the "China-Afghanistan comprehensive and cooperative partnership has entered a new phase of development."<sup>2</sup> Karzai's March 2010 state visit to China further developed the PRC-Afghanistan relationship, underscoring Beijing's support for the Karzai government even while encouraging Kabul to adopt additional measures to curb the regional narcotics trafficking and terrorism

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Lee, "Taliban force a China switch," *Asia Times Online*, March 6, 2009, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KC06Ad01.html/>.

<sup>2</sup> "China pledges continued support to Afghanistan's reconstruction," Xinhua, August 20, 2007, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-08/20/content\\_6570572.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-08/20/content_6570572.htm).

emanating from Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

When Western governments complained that Karzai's re-election in 2009 had been tainted by fraud, Chinese officials declined to comment, treating the issue as an Afghan internal affair. In the joint statement issued at the end of Karzai's visit, the PRC reaffirmed its adherence to "the principle of non-interference into other countries' internal affairs; its respect for Afghanistan's independence; its sovereignty and territorial integrity; [and] its respect for the Afghan people's choice of a development road suited to their national conditions."<sup>4</sup> Instead, PRC officials emphasized their desire to expand China's commercial and other non-military presence in Afghanistan. Karzai visited China again in June 2012, to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. During his stay, China and Afghanistan jointly declared that they would upgrade their relations to a Strategic and Cooperative Partnership, continue high-level contacts, and enhance the two countries' economic, societal and security cooperation both bilaterally and within multilateral frameworks such as the SCO and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.<sup>5</sup> Karzai visited China again in September 2013 for four days, meeting with current President Xi Jinping as well as Premier Li Keqiang and Vice Premier Wang Yang.<sup>6</sup> In a joint statement, Karzai and Xi reiterated that their two countries "will continue to strengthen their cooperation in the political, economic, cultural and security fields, and international and regional affairs, i.e. the five pillars of bilateral cooperation, so as to enrich the content of the China-Afghanistan Strategic and Cooperative Partnership."<sup>7</sup> They also "agreed to strengthen practical cooperation in such fields as resources and energy development, infrastructure development, and agriculture," and "called for a stronger role for the SCO in the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan."<sup>8</sup> During his last visit to China in May 2014, Karzai attended a meeting of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building in Asia (CICA) and briefed PRC leaders on Afghanistan's recent political, economic and military developments.<sup>9</sup>

The Chinese government has viewed the NATO military campaign in Afghanistan, which began in 2003 when NATO assumed command of the UN-mandated ISAF, with suspicion. The main Chinese fear was that the United States was trying to establish an enduring military presence to China's west as an element in a region-wide containment strategy against Beijing. Another Chinese concern was that Washington was trying to entangle China into joining its frustratingly challenging post-invasion stabilization efforts. Although Beijing tried to describe its campaign against Uyghur terrorism as a parallel effort, most Western government rejected that characterization and the United States refused to render Uyghur militants captured in Afghanistan to China for execution. Chinese policymakers still believe that the West applies a double standard

---

<sup>3</sup> "China, Afghanistan plan closer partnership as Karzai concludes state visit," People's Daily Online [English], March 25, 2010, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6930867.html>; and "Karzai, Hu discuss economic ties," *Asia Times Online*, March 26, 2010, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central\\_Asia/LC26Ag02.html/](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/LC26Ag02.html/).

<sup>4</sup> "China Reiterates Support for Peaceful Reconstruction in Afghanistan," China Radio International English Service, March 25, 2010, <http://english.cri.cn/6909/2010/03/25/1461s559266.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> "China, Afghanistan upgrade ties to strategic partnership," Xinhua, June 8, 2012, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-06/08/c\\_131640214.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-06/08/c_131640214.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Tahir Khan, "China assures Karzai of cooperative strategic partnership," News Pakistan, September 28, 2013, <http://www.newspakistan.pk/2013/09/28/china-assures-karzai-cooperative-strategic-partnership/>.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> "China Makes An Economic Prescription For Post-2014 Afghanistan," Yicai.com, September 29, 2013, <http://www.yicai.com/news/2013/09/3035542.html>.

to Beijing's counterterrorism activities.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, they have become more comfortable over time with the NATO military presence in Afghanistan. PRC analysts have come to recognize that Western forces engaged in Afghanistan, rather than threatening China, have instead concentrated on suppressing the Taliban and other Eurasian-based terrorist movements. Since these groups threaten PRC-friendly regimes in Central Asia and support Uyghur militants seeking to end Beijing's control over Xinjiang, Chinese security interests have benefited from the NATO presence. Furthermore, Chinese firms have enjoyed NATO's protection from local terrorists without China having to contribute its own combat forces or incur other major costs. Although some Chinese analysts think the Western military drawdown will actually reduce support for Islamist terrorism in Afghanistan or otherwise enhance China's security, many others believe that the NATO withdrawals will worsen the security situation in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>

This occasional report consists of two main parts. The first half reviews China's most important interests relating to Afghanistan. These include ensuring China's internal security and territorial integrity; countering transnational terrorism; limiting narcotics flows from Afghanistan into China; promoting security in the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Central Asia; securing access to Afghanistan's natural resources; limiting the disruptive effects of the Afghan conflict on China's economic interests in surrounding countries; and keeping any NATO military presence in its western neighbors limited in size and duration. The second part assesses the effectiveness of China's strategy and tactics regarding Afghanistan. Chinese leaders have encouraged other governments and multinational institutions to provide economic and security assistance to Afghanistan, while keeping their own contributions modest. Although China may still hope to free ride on these other actors, the Western military drawdown in Afghanistan raises the risk that the Afghan Taliban may regain influence and resume supporting anti-Beijing terrorist groups and threatening China's regional security and economic interests. Afghanistan's security troubles still prevent Chinese firms from exploiting their investment opportunities in the country. China's potential security partners in Afghanistan—which include the Kabul government, many foreign countries and several regional multinational institutions—all lack either the capacity or the will to fully substitute for the decreasing Western economic and security presence in Afghanistan. Both Beijing and its partners need to assess how China might change its strategy and tactics in response to Afghan developments, and how Chinese actions will shape future events in Afghanistan.

## **Part I: Chinese Interests in Afghanistan**

Geography has a major impact in shaping Beijing's priorities regarding Afghanistan. The PRC government's most important concern is that developments in Afghanistan could affect China's internal security, especially in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The recent surge in terrorism in Xinjiang (and beyond) has preoccupied Beijing. PRC policymakers believe developments in Afghanistan, such as transnational terrorism and narcotrafficking, could contribute to that region's socioeconomic challenges. Second, PRC policymakers worry about security in the regions west of China, above all Pakistan but also Central Asia. Pakistan is an important, if troublesome, ally for Beijing, while China wants to preserve political stability in

---

<sup>10</sup> Xu Yang et al., "Representatives Condemn Some Western Countries' Double Standard On Terrorism," Xinhua, March 3, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-03/03/c\\_119587201.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-03/03/c_119587201.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Dirk van der Kley, "China's foreign policy in Afghanistan," Lowy Institute, October 24, 2014, <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinas-foreign-policy-afghanistan>.

Central Asia, a region that could serve as a transmission belt of terrorism and other instability into China, but could also serve as an economic bridge between the PRC and Europe, as well as a source of important natural resources. China's economic interests in Afghanistan itself, though still modest, could become more important over time. Finally, the potential for developments in Afghanistan to affect China's global reputation and relations with Russia and the United States remains a challenge. Although the Afghanistan issue has declined in importance in China-U.S. relations since the early years of the Obama administration, when Afghanistan was the new White House's main security concern, PRC policymakers still want to avoid accusations that China has been shirking its international responsibilities in Afghanistan. Beijing also consults with Moscow regarding Afghanistan, though for now the two regional powers have not formulated let alone conducted a joint policy regarding that country.

### Security in Xinjiang

The Chinese government has long worried about Muslim-inspired ethnic separatism in Xinjiang, an area constituting one-sixth of the PRC that borders Pakistan, Afghanistan, and several Central Asian countries (Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). Chinese policymaker's attempts to integrate Xinjiang into the rest of the PRC, including encouraging massive Han migration to the region and, in the view of some Uyghurs, threatening their rights and cultural heritage have encountered strong local opposition.<sup>12</sup> At times, this resistance has taken the form of terrorism in Xinjiang and beyond. The rise of the Afghan Taliban in the latter 1990s alarmed Chinese officials precisely because of the group's ties with other Islamic extremist groups, some of which advocated independence for Xinjiang. One reason Sino-Afghan relations deteriorated under Taliban rule was that Chinese authorities estimate that hundreds of Uyghur militants underwent training in Afghanistan when the Taliban controlled the country before the October 2001 U.S. invasion.<sup>13</sup> Earlier in 2001, China claimed (improbably) that Taliban forces had also crossed over the Wakhan Corridor—a narrow strip of sparsely populated high-altitude land that, in addition to separating Pakistan and Tajikistan, physically connects Afghanistan and China along a 50-mile (76-kilometer) border that has been formally closed for around a century due to harsh climate conditions and mutual border security concerns.<sup>14</sup>

Although the U.S. invasion eliminated the immediate threat from the Taliban in Afghanistan, the failure of NATO's post-conflict stabilization efforts renewed Beijing's alarm about the spread of extremism and terrorism from Afghanistan to Xinjiang. As Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in March 2014, "Afghanistan's peace and stability has a direct bearing on security in China's western

---

<sup>12</sup> James Millward, "China's Two Problems with the Uyghurs," *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 28, 2014, <http://www.lareviewofbooks.org/essay/chinas-two-problems-uyghurs/>; and Dan Levin, "Uighurs' Veils Signal Protest Against China's Restrictions," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/08/world/asia/uighurs-veils-a-protest-against-chinas-curbs.html?action=click&contentCollection=Asia%20Pacific&module=RelatedCoverage&region=Marginalia&pgty=article/&r=1>.

<sup>13</sup> Philip P. Pan and John Pomfret, "Bin Laden Network's China Connection; Beijing Estimates 1,000 Muslims Have Received Training in Al Qaeda Camps," *Highbeam.com*, November 11, 2001, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-487215.html>; and "Anger over Guantanamo Bay ruling," *BBC News*, October 7, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7658045.stm>.

<sup>14</sup> Dru C. Gladney: "Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism?" *The China Quarterly*, No. 174, June 2003, pp. 451-467.

region.”<sup>15</sup> China’s main declared security concern is that Uyghur militants will find safe havens in Afghanistan and establish support networks with help from other terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to some sources, China’s professed fear of Uyghur terrorists in Afghanistan is excessive. The U.S. government believes that only a small number of Uyghur militants are present in Afghanistan and that they have little training or weaponry.<sup>16</sup> Still, Chinese officials may be fixated on the risk of the Taliban’s re-establishing control over Afghanistan, since the previous Afghan Taliban government allowed Uyghur terrorists to join al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist camps. The recent upsurge in Xinjiang-related terrorist attacks, which has led the government to declare a yearlong campaign against terrorism, has likely reinforced this perception.<sup>17</sup> In April 2013, 21 people were killed in a clash allegedly stemming from a long-standing dispute between Chinese officials and ethnic Uyghurs about the regulation of Islamic practices such as shaving beards and wearing veils.<sup>18</sup> In June 2013, 35 people near Turpan and 24 people in Lukqun died in such attacks, according to Chinese authorities. Shortly thereafter, about one hundred people in Khotan attacked a police station armed with knives. Following the attacks, the Politburo standing committee released a statement demanding “a resolute strike” against “violent terrorist forces.”<sup>19</sup> In late October, an SUV exploded in a suicide attack at Tiananmen Square, killing its three occupants and two bystanders, while injuring 40 people.<sup>20</sup> The incident marked the first major terrorist incident and the first suicide attack in Beijing, but other incidents linked to Uyghurs have occurred since then, the most notable being the mass attack at Kunming Train Station in March 2014. PRC policymakers naturally value countering terrorism in China more than suppressing it elsewhere, but Chinese analysts believe that much of this terrorism is foreign-sponsored even if they disagree about how best to address its Afghan dimensions.<sup>21</sup>

### Countering Regional Narcotics Flows

Another Chinese concern is the flow of Afghan narcotics entering the PRC. Afghanistan produces and exports more opium than any other country. Part of its territory forms the heroin-producing zone known as the “Golden Crescent,” which also comprises portions of Pakistan and Iran. Although China is not situated along the “Northern Route” through which Afghan illicit drugs have traditionally entered Central Asia and Europe, new narcotics trafficking networks have developed since 2001 that transport drugs from Afghanistan via Pakistan and Central Asia into China. In the past, PRC authorities were most concerned with the opium produced and imported

<sup>15</sup> “China to hold int’l conference on Afghanistan issue,” Xinhua, March 8, 2014,

[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2014-03/08/c\\_133170656.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2014-03/08/c_133170656.htm)

<sup>16</sup> William Dalrymple, “Afghanistan: as China forges new alliances, a new Great Game has begun,” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/18/afghanistan-china-new-great-game-united-states>.

<sup>17</sup> “China to start year-long anti-terror operation,” Xinhua, May 26, 2014, [http://china.org.cn/china/2014-05/26/content\\_32486889.htm](http://china.org.cn/china/2014-05/26/content_32486889.htm).

<sup>18</sup> “Xinjiang violence: Two sentenced to death in China,” BBC, August 13, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-23665071>.

<sup>19</sup> “Ethnic unrest in Xinjiang: Unveiled threats,” *The Economist*, July 4, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21580491-more-outbreaks-violence-show-governments-policies-are-not-working-unveiled-threats/>.

<sup>20</sup> Zhou Zunyou, “Escalation of terrorist violence must push Beijing to address root causes,” *South China Morning Post*, September 5, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1347357/escalation-terrorist-violence-must-push-beijing-address-root/>.

<sup>21</sup> Dirk van der Kley, “China’s foreign policy in Afghanistan,” Lowy Institute, October 24, 2014, <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinas-foreign-policy-afghanistan>.

from the “Golden Triangle” in Southeast Asia, but this problem has decreased significantly in the past decade. The extensive and ill-regulated Chinese-Tajikistan border presents smugglers with ample opportunities to transit narcotics into the PRC. A marked increase in drug abuse and drug-related HIV/AIDS cases has been reported in Xinjiang and other regions due to the influx of narcotics from the Golden Crescent region.<sup>22</sup> While reliable statistics are difficult to obtain, the *South China Morning Post* has suggested that Xinjiang has overtaken Yunnan and the Golden Triangle as the focal point of entry for narcotics.<sup>23</sup> This steep rise has prompted Xinjiang officials to request that Beijing assign increased security forces at border regions.<sup>24</sup> According to some observers, the surge in heroin use in Xinjiang has contributed to the breakdown of societal cohesion there.<sup>25</sup> President Hu Jintao reportedly circulated an internal memo calling for security mobilization in Xinjiang to combat narcotics growth.<sup>26</sup> Another reason for Chinese alarm about Afghan drug trafficking is its link to Afghan narcoterrorism. Many analysts believe that the Taliban uses revenues from the opium trade to purchase weapons, fund training and buy support.<sup>27</sup> Other Islamist terrorist movements active in Central Asia also finance activities through narcotics trafficking.<sup>28</sup> The resulting increase in Islamist terrorism risks empowering Uyghur militants and other regional terrorists.

## Promoting Regional Stability

### *Pakistan*

China’s close ties to Pakistan also help define the PRC’s potential role in Afghanistan, though in conflicting ways. China and Pakistan have been allies almost since both states were founded in the late 1940s. Since then, Pakistan and the PRC have developed cultural and economic ties, though their shared strategic interests remain the main binding force of their relationship. Chinese officials have traditionally considered Pakistan a counterweight to India in South Asia, an important base for enhancing Beijing’s influence in Central Asia, and a significant economic partner, both directly and as a transit country. PRC analysts sometimes, like their Pakistani counterparts, argue that India is seeking to deepen its presence in Afghanistan to limit Pakistani and Chinese influence in that country.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the economic and strategic benefits of assisting Pakistan, many Chinese also view maintaining good relations with the Islamic Republic of Pakistan as advantageous for

---

<sup>22</sup> “‘Golden Crescent’ drug spell plagues China’s northwest,” Xinhua, September 1, 2007, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-09/01/content\\_6644790.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-09/01/content_6644790.htm).

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Chen, “Xinjiang becomes hub for Central Asia’s drug trade,” *South China Morning Post*, September 5, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/article/607957/xinjiang-becomes-hub-central-asias-drug-trade/>.

<sup>24</sup> Lei Xiaoxun and Zhu Zhe, “Xinjiang targets drug trafficking,” *China Daily*, March 10, 2009, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-03/10/content\\_7557566.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-03/10/content_7557566.htm).

<sup>25</sup> “Golden Crescent” drug spell plagues China’s northwest,” Xinhua, September 1, 2007, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-09/01/content\\_6644790.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-09/01/content_6644790.htm).

<sup>26</sup> Chen, “Xinjiang becomes hub.”

<sup>27</sup> “Afghanistan’s Opium Crisis Undermines Its Long-term Stability,” National Security Network, May 13, 2008, <http://archives.nsnetwork.org/node/858>.

<sup>28</sup> Ziad Haider: “Sino-Pakistan Relations and Xinjiang’s Uighurs: Politics, Trade, and Islam along the Karakoram Highway,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 4, July-August 2005, pp. 522.

<sup>29</sup> U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “2009 Report To Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission,” 111th Cong., 1st sess., November 2009, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009, p. 213.



Beijing's image in other Muslim nations in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.<sup>30</sup> Due to their aversion to U.S. counterterrorist policies and Washington's ties with India, opinion polls show that Pakistanis now overwhelmingly view China more favorably than they view the United States.<sup>31</sup> A half-century of close collaboration between Chinese and Pakistani security officials gives Beijing sufficient weight in Islamabad to pressure Pakistan's military and intelligence services to curtail their support for Islamist extremists. In the past, the PRC has used its ties with Pakistan to induce the Pakistani security forces to suppress extremist groups that have attacked Chinese workers in Pakistan or supported Uyghur separatists.<sup>32</sup>

Even so, reports persist that Chinese leaders remain concerned about Pakistani links with terrorism, and may not be fully satisfied with repeated Pakistani assertions that Islamabad will use its influence and power to keep Islamist militants away from Chinese targets. PRC officials have repeatedly complained to their Pakistani counterparts about the presence of Uyghur militants in Pakistan's northwest tribal zones.<sup>33</sup> China frequently refers to these groups as the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM). In addition, the Chinese authorities have expressed fears that militants might threaten Chinese nationals working in Pakistan.<sup>34</sup> Baloch nationalists have abducted PRC citizens to protest unwelcome Chinese economic activities in Balochistan (including at Gwadar Port) as well as to earn money from ransom payments. When Hu met then-Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari in Beijing in July 2010, he pointedly "appreciated the efforts the Pakistani government had made to safeguard the security of Chinese nationals and organizations in Pakistan."<sup>35</sup>

Pakistani leaders strive to reassure PRC representatives that they do not consider China a legitimate target for terrorism. Zardari traveled to Beijing approximately once every three months to inform PRC policymakers about his counterterrorism commitments. When Zardari met Hu in Beijing on July 7, 2010, he stressed that "Pakistan would create a secure and sound environment for Chinese firms" to encourage more Chinese investment in Pakistan.<sup>36</sup> Senior representatives of the Pakistani religious parties have also tried to reassure the PRC about their stance regarding Uyghur militant groups. In February 2009, the Jamaat-e-Islami Party signed a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese Communist Party that supported measures to enhance regional stability.<sup>37</sup> Many Pakistani-supported terrorists presumably appreciate Beijing's regular support for Islamabad in its confrontations with India. When terrorists do attack Chinese targets in

<sup>30</sup> Tarique Niazi, "Thunder in Sino-Pakistani Relations," Association for Asia Research, April 9, 2006, <http://www.asianresearch.org/articles/2841.html>.

<sup>31</sup> "China, Pakistan sign treaty for friendship, cooperation and good-neighborly relations," People's Daily Online, April 6, 2005, [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200504/06/eng20050406\\_179629.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200504/06/eng20050406_179629.html).

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Small, "China's Af-Pak Moment," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 20, 2009, [http://www.gmfus.org/doc/Small\\_Af-Pak\\_Brief\\_0509\\_final.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/doc/Small_Af-Pak_Brief_0509_final.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Mariana Baabar, "When friends complain, someone must listen," *International: The News*, March 21, 2009, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=168290&Cat=2&dt=3/21/2009>; and "China asked Zardari to act against ETIM?" *Daily Times*, April 9, 2009, <http://archives.dailytimes.com.pk/main/09-Apr-2009/china-asked-zardari-to-act-against-etim>.

<sup>34</sup> Amir Mir, "10 terror suspects extradited to China," *International: The News*, June 6, 2009, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=22569&Cat=13&dt=6/5/2009>.

<sup>35</sup> "Hu Jintao Holds Talks with Pakistani President Zardari," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, July, 7, 2010, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t715094.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> "Hu Jintao Holds Talks with Pakistani President Zardari."

<sup>37</sup> "Jamaat-e-Islami, Chinese Communist Party ink MoU," *International: The News*, February 17, 2009, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=163116&Cat=6&dt=2/16/2009>.

Pakistan, the authorities react strongly, as President Pervez Musharraf did when he reportedly quickly bowed to PRC demands to attack Islamabad's Red Mosque (Lal Masjid) in July 2007 after a group of Chinese women were kidnapped by Pakistani jihadists using the complex as a sanctuary.<sup>38</sup> Pakistani officials have also never publicly promoted Uyghur independence aspirations despite their general professions of Islamic solidarity.<sup>39</sup> In 2009, Pakistani authorities extradited captured Uyghur militants to the PRC despite international concerns that they would not receive fair treatment in China.<sup>40</sup>

Barnett Rubin, a U.S. government advisor on Afghanistan and Pakistan, stated that China's confidence in Pakistan's ability to prevent terrorist attacks against Chinese interests in Afghanistan has declined, leading China to cooperate more with the United States and India because of these countries' shared interests in countering Pakistan-related terrorism.<sup>41</sup> But on July 21, 2014, PRC special envoy for Afghanistan Sun Yuxi strongly denied that Pakistan's intelligence services were using terrorism to destabilize Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup> Whatever their doubts, Chinese officials realize that "preventing and responding to Xinjiang's 'terrorist' threats requires supporting Islamabad's counter-terrorism efforts."<sup>43</sup> A strong Pakistani government can best rein in both the Afghan Taliban and associated Uyghur militant groups. At a 2013 meeting between Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, the two countries issued a joint agreement saying they would "work with regional countries and the international community to help Afghanistan achieve peace, stability and security" following the NATO troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup> PRC representatives say that much of the security assistance China provides Pakistan is designed to fight terrorists rather than India.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, Chinese officials are reluctant to jeopardize their influence with Pakistani actors through extensive pressure on Islamabad to abandon its support for all forms of terrorism, especially when they can free ride on

---

<sup>38</sup> Tariq Mahmud Ashraf, "The Impact of Pakistan-China Defense Ties on the War on Terrorism," *Pakistan Defence*, September 27, 2008, <http://defence.pk/threads/the-impact-of-pakistan-china-defense-ties-on-the-war-on-terrorism.14622/>; "Five Chinese held hostage at Lal Masjid," *Daily Times*, June 23, 2007, <http://archives.dailytimes.com.pk/main/23-Jun-2007/five-chinese-held-hostage-at-lal-masjid/>; and "China tells Pakistan to better protect Chinese citizens," *Daily Times*, June 28, 2007, <http://archives.dailytimes.com.pk/main/28-Jun-2007/china-tells-pakistan-to-better-protect-chinese-citizens/>.

<sup>39</sup> Ziad Haider, "Sino-Pakistan Relations and Xinjiang's Uighurs: Politics, Trade, and Islam along the Karakoram Highway," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 4, July-August 2005, p. 522.

<sup>40</sup> "Freedom House Condemns Pakistan, China for Uighur Extraditions," Freedom House, May 7, 2009, <http://freedomhouse.org/article/freedom-house-condemns-pakistan-china-uighur-extraditions?page=70&release=815#.VAkWE0tbTwI>.

<sup>41</sup> William Dalrymple, "Afghanistan: As China forges new alliances, a new Great Game has begun," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/18/afghanistan-china-new-great-game-united-states>

<sup>42</sup> Ananth Krishnan, "ISI has been effective in fighting terror, says China's new Afghan envoy," *The Hindu*, July 22, 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/world/isi-has-been-effective-in-fighting-terror-says-chinas-new-afghan-envoy/article6233807.ece>; and "Chinese envoy to Afghanistan lauds ISI's efforts to fight terrorism," *The Express Tribune*, July 21, 2014, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/738832/chinese-envoy-to-afghanistan-lauds-isis-efforts-to-fight-terrorism/>.

<sup>43</sup> Samantha Hoffman, "China and Pakistan: Evolving Focus on Stability within Continuity," *China Brief*, Vol.11, No. 22, November 2011, pp. 5-8.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Bodeen, "Pakistan, China set sights on Arabian Sea link," *Yahoo News*, July 5, 2013, <http://news.yahoo.com/pakistan-china-set-sights-arabian-104250804.html>.

<sup>45</sup> B. Raman, "Chinese Aid to Pakistan in Counter-Terrorism: Response to U.S. Request?," *Raman's Strategic Analysis*, June 28, 2009, <http://www.ramanstrategicanalysis.blogspot.com/2009/06/chinese-aid-to-pakistan-in-counter.html>.

Washington's efforts.<sup>46</sup> While PRC representatives have pressed Pakistani officials to end their support for radical Islamist groups seeking to challenge Beijing's control of Xinjiang, no clear evidence exists that they have made much effort to decrease Pakistani support for Islamists fighting the governments of Afghanistan or India.

### *Central Asia*

The Chinese government is concerned that adverse security developments in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan could affect important Chinese interests. Beijing's primary regional security goal is to counter transnational support for separatism, terrorism and religious extremism. PRC policymakers fear that what they term these "three evil forces" could adversely affect Beijing's control over Xinjiang and threaten governments friendly to China. In his meeting with Karzai in March 2010, Prime Minister Wen declared that "terrorism and drug trafficking are common dangers facing Afghanistan and neighboring countries that need the long-term, close and unending cooperation of each nation."<sup>47</sup> Chinese officials have relied on diplomatic initiatives and bilateral security assistance to bolster Central Asian governments against domestic threats, as well as to induce these governments to suppress local support for Uyghur separatist activities in China. Beijing's multilateral diplomacy has focused on the SCO, which under Chinese guidance is formally devoted to fighting the "three evil forces." That said, China has traditionally relied primarily on Russia, the SCO's co-leader, to uphold Central Asian security. Chinese and Russian analysts share fears that social revolutions in Central Asia could adversely affect regional stability. In addition to Western-backed democratization efforts, Russian and Chinese analysts also worry that the recent political upheavals in the Muslim Middle East could spread to Central Asia and Afghanistan, since these experts believe that these regions share important similarities in terms of political systems, religious affiliation and natural-resource-dependent economies.<sup>48</sup> The emergence of the "Islamic State" as a major regional force in 2014 could deepen these anxieties due to the movement's aspirations, reported in the Chinese media, to extend its self-declared Caliphate into Xinjiang. In August, the PRC backed Iraqi government appeals to the United States to conduct air strikes against the group.<sup>49</sup> Some Afghans associated with the Taliban have called for establishing an Islamic State-style regime in Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup> A decision by the Afghan Taliban and other Afghanistan-based Muslim militants to align with the Islamic State would deepen Chinese fears regarding Afghanistan's potential to become a base for strengthening and spreading Islamic extremism in Pakistan, Central Asia and China.

### **Economic Opportunities**

---

<sup>46</sup> John Dyrby Paulsen, "185 PCTR 11 E Rev. 1 Final—Afghanistan—The Regional Context," NATO Parliamentary Assembly, November 7, 2011, <http://www.nato-pa.int/default.asp?SHORTCUT=2553>.

<sup>47</sup> "China, Afghanistan vow to fight terrorism, drugs," AFP, March 25, 2010,, <http://pakistanpal.livejournal.com/675452.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Pan Zhiping, "Central Asia and the Social Turmoil in Northern Africa and Middle East," *Academic Journal of Xinjiang University*, April 2011, <http://www.docin.com/p-667875588.html>; author interviews with Russian and Chinese analysts.

<sup>49</sup> Alexa Olesen, "China Sees Islamic State Inching Closer to Home," *Foreign Policy*, August 11, 2014, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/08/11/the\\_islamic\\_state\\_chinese\\_media\\_hong\\_kong\\_phoenix\\_xinjiang](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/08/11/the_islamic_state_chinese_media_hong_kong_phoenix_xinjiang).

<sup>50</sup> Ghanizada, "Female lawmaker endorses Taliban and Islamic State in Afghanistan," *Khaama Press*, August 15, 2014, <http://www.khaama.com/female-lawmaker-endorses-taliban-and-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-6553>.

### *Investments in Afghanistan*

Thanks to several major deals a few years ago, PRC companies have become the leading foreign investors by value in Afghanistan's natural resource industry. These firms have yet to develop these projects fully due to security, logistical, legal and other challenges. In addition, China has been able to find cheaper and more reliable alternative sources for these natural resources, such as copper. Yet a future improvement in the security environment in Afghanistan, or a decrease in the reliability of alternative supplies, could induce China to build on its strong position as the leading foreign investor in many of Afghanistan's economic sectors.

In principle, a natural economic partnership exists between resource-rich Afghanistan and a China abundant in capital and technology. Afghanistan is thought to have unexplored or underdeveloped reserves of oil, natural gas, iron, gold, copper and other raw materials that China imports in abundance.<sup>51</sup> By acquiring these products from Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries along the proposed new Economic Silk Road Belt, the PRC could further diversify its source of imports away from more distant and similarly volatile world regions, whose products are transported to China along lengthy ocean shipping routes vulnerable to pirates, foreign navies and other interruptions. Importing materials from Afghanistan and neighboring regions also permits Beijing to pursue a more geographically balanced process of internal economic development, since it facilitates commercial activities in China's western provinces. Trade with Afghanistan also promotes the economic growth of Pakistan and the Central Asian republics—two other regions that have received considerable PRC direct investment in recent years.

Some Chinese and other foreign investors have acquired natural resources contracts in Afghanistan in the hopes that the local security and regional economic situations might improve, but corruption, the country's extremely undeveloped infrastructure and above all the unending insurgency have scared off most other investors.<sup>52</sup> The PRC's investment in Afghanistan appeared to surge a few years ago when, after the Afghan government opened its energy, mineral and raw materials sectors to foreign investment in 2007, several PRC companies signed agreements to invest billions of dollars in various projects. For example, the Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) purchased a controlling stake in the enormous Aynak copper field. The November 2007 conditional bid of more than \$3 billion made that transaction the single largest foreign direct investment in Afghanistan.<sup>53</sup> The state-owned MCC offered a package of potential benefits—including significant local hires and possible construction of railroads and other transportation infrastructure—that their privately held Western competitors could not match. Afghan and foreign analysts had hoped that the Chinese venture at Aynak would become sufficiently successful to serve as a catalyst for additional foreign investments.<sup>54</sup> Thus far, China's development of the mine and associated infrastructure has made little progress since the April 2008 contract signing. The

---

51 Nicklas Norling, "The Emerging China-Afghanistan Relationship," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 14, 2008, <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4858/>.

52 Nirav Patel and David Capezza, "Assessing Prospects for U.S.-China-Afghanistan Cooperation," *Small Wars Journal*, April 1, 2009, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/assessing-prospects-for-us-china-afghanistan-cooperation>.

53 Pan Guang, "China's Policy on the Conflict in Afghanistan," *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2010, pp. 115-120.

54 "Afghan Cabinet discusses China's Aynak project investment," Xinhua, May, 22, 2011, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-05/22/c\\_13888275.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-05/22/c_13888275.htm).

stated reason for the delay is the discovery and ongoing excavation of an archeological dig at the site.<sup>55</sup> Additional concerns, including the low world price for copper, China's easy access to alternative foreign copper suppliers and, above all, concerns about the security of the investment and the safety of the Chinese nationals also likely played a role. The Taliban threatened to target Chinese workers and the Aynak project because they consider any extraction of Afghanistan's resources by foreign companies to be theft. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said that, "We are against any foreign company extracting the mineral [wealth] of Afghanistan as long as Afghanistan is under occupation,"<sup>56</sup> The Afghan National Police planned to position 1,500 special recruits to guard the mine, but owing to the construction delays only an outer circle of guards from a special resource protection unit are currently protecting the mine.<sup>57</sup> At one point, some 2,000 U.S. soldiers provided general security in Logar Province, where the mine is located, as well as security for the projected routes for the road and railway as part of their mission of defending Afghanistan's critical economic infrastructure.<sup>58</sup> For their part, Afghan officials see foreign trade and investment as perhaps their best means to reduce their dependence on international assistance, which currently covers 90 percent of the Afghan government's budget. Yet many Afghans suspect that economic benefits from Chinese investments, such as the Aynak project, will not fully materialize. They also worry about the fate of the investment and locality after the lease expires.

Economic ties between the two countries have remained modest. According to Chinese statistics, two-way trade between Afghanistan and the PRC amounted to only \$155 million in 2008.<sup>59</sup> Even after the end of the worst of the world financial crisis, bilateral trade amounted to only \$715 million in 2010.<sup>60</sup> Bilateral trade consists primarily of China's selling Afghans consumer goods while importing vast quantities of raw materials. Specifically, the main Chinese exports to Afghanistan include machinery, electronics, building materials, light industrial goods, domestic appliances, and green tea, while the main exports from Afghanistan to China include sheep leather, cotton, and carpets.<sup>61</sup> Recent PRC investment activity in Afghanistan has involved only a small number of firms, and these have been visibly concentrated on gaining access to raw materials and offering plans (largely unrealized) to develop the infrastructure required to transport these goods to China.

Chinese companies have also acquired energy production rights in Afghanistan. In September 2011, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) won a bid to develop an oilfield at Amu

---

<sup>55</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison, "Afghan mine delays at ancient site delight archeologists," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/23/archaeologists-joy-afghan-mine-delay>.

<sup>56</sup> Maria Abi-Habib, Yaroslav Trofimov and Ziaulhaq Sultani, "Delays at Chinese-Run Afghan Mines Raise Security Fears," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323330604578143251594500058?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10001424127887323330604578143251594500058.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison, "Afghan mine delays at ancient site delight archeologists," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/23/archaeologists-joy-afghan-mine-delay>.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Schiffer, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, "The Impact of China's Economic and Security Interests in Continental Asia of the United States," Washington, DC, May 20, 2009, <http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/transcripts/5.20.09HearingTranscript.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> Christopher Bodeen, "China says it agrees with Afghanistan on politics," *The World Post*, March 25, 2010, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20100325/as-china-afghanistan/>.

<sup>60</sup> Zhao Huasheng: "China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, March 2012. [http://csis.org/files/publication/120322\\_Zhao\\_ChinaAfghan\\_web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/120322_Zhao_ChinaAfghan_web.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*

Darya, in conjunction with Afghanistan's Watan Group.<sup>62</sup> It was the first oilfield auction that Afghanistan has offered in ten years. According to geological estimates, China may not produce much oil from the site, but the deal does give China access to other undeveloped oil and gas fields in Afghanistan that could yield potentially millions of barrels.<sup>63</sup> In December 2011, the Afghan government awarded the CNPC a contract to explore oil and gas reserves in the northeastern Afghan provinces of Sari Pul and Faryab. This is the first oil and gas exploration contract that the Afghan government awarded entirely to a foreign firm. If executed as planned, Afghanistan could earn nearly \$7 billion from the royalties, rent and taxes.<sup>64</sup>

Despite a few prominent deals, as of late 2011, Chinese firms were publicly involved in only 40 different reconstruction projects in Afghanistan, worth a total of \$500 million.<sup>65</sup> China might be understating its presence in Afghanistan's natural and energy resources in order to prevent a repeat of conflicts in Pakistan. An uprising in Balochistan, a western province that comprises almost half of Pakistan, was caused in part by local residents' perceptions that their land and mineral wealth were being taken from them by corrupt Pakistani officials in the name of friendly relations between China and Pakistan. In southern Afghanistan, local people have already become angry with Chinese mining corporations because they think that they have not received promised benefits from Chinese investment.<sup>66</sup> Hu told Karzai in 2010 that "China attached great importance to the security of its citizens and companies in Afghanistan, urging the country to take effective measures and improve security work to ensure a sound environment for bilateral cooperation."<sup>67</sup> When he visited China in 2012, Karzai accordingly pledged "tangible measures" to protect Chinese citizens and contractors working in Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup> Although the country's violence has generally spared Chinese nationals, a few serious incidents have occurred, alarming potential Chinese investors and workers in Afghanistan. These include a June 2004 attack that killed 11 PRC road workers in northeast Afghanistan, as well as the January 2010 kidnapping of two Chinese engineers in the northern Afghan province of Faryab by declared members of the Taliban. In August 2013, three Chinese citizens were found murdered in a Kabul apartment, further frightening off potential Chinese business.<sup>69</sup>

### *Regional Economic Integration*

China's growing energy and commercial ties with Central Asia also influence Beijing's Afghanistan strategy. China's booming economy, combined with its declining domestic energy

<sup>62</sup> "Chinese state-run oil firm wins Afghanistan project," WantChinaTimes.com, September 17, 2011, <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20110917000008&cid=1202>.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Zhao Huasheng, "China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances and Perspectives," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, March 2012, [http://csis.org/files/publication/120322\\_Zhao\\_ChinaAfghan\\_web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/120322_Zhao_ChinaAfghan_web.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> Zhou Xin, "Analysis: China seeks profit, shuns politics, in Afghanistan," Reuters, October 4, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/10/04/us-china-afghanistan-idUSTRE79324R20111004/>.

<sup>66</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, "China's Leadership Opportunity in Afghanistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2, 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/04/02/china-s-leadership-opportunity-in-afghanistan/fvvs>.

<sup>67</sup> "Hu Jintao Holds Talks with Afghan President Karzai," Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in San Francisco, March 24, 2010, <http://www.chinaconsulatesf.org/eng/xw/t675482.htm>.

<sup>68</sup> Christopher Bodeen, "With New Pact, China Moves to Shore up Afghan Ties," Associated Press, June 8, 2012, <http://www.bigstory.ap.org/article/new-pact-china-moves-shore-afghan-ties>.

<sup>69</sup> "Three Chinese murdered in Afghan capital, one missing: embassy," *Dawn*, August 10, 2013, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1035201/three-chinese-murdered-in-afghan-capital-one-missing-embassy/>.

production, has resulted in the PRC's importing oil and gas from these countries. Besides securing access to the region's energy resources, PRC officials also desire to enhance commerce between China's relatively impoverished northwestern regions and their Central Asian neighbors. Increased commerce with Central Asia promotes the economic development of Xinjiang, Tibet, and other PRC regions that have lagged behind China's vibrant eastern cities, helping to realize Beijing's West Development Strategy.<sup>70</sup> Although PRC trade with Central Asia constitutes only a small percentage of China's overall commerce, it represents a greater and more important share for western China due to its geographic location.

In September 2013, during a visit to four Central Asian countries, President Xi called for building a Silk Road Economic Belt, using a new regional transportation network to enhance economic integration. Although the initiative has focused on Pakistan and Central Asia, some Afghan analysts saw this initiative as an opportunity for their country.<sup>71</sup> However, China has not supported the distinct, if similarly named, U.S. vision of a "New Silk Road," which would link Afghanistan primarily with other Central and South Asian countries. China's "Silk Roads" would connect the PRC to Central Asia and to Iran but would bypass Afghanistan, which would isolate the country economically.<sup>72</sup> Yet the security of Central Asia's economic resources and the land-based transportation routes linking them to China depends heavily on the situation in Afghanistan. Thus far, the Taliban insurgency has not directly threatened existing projects, but this could change, and the war has already made it difficult to attract investment to construct new ones.

### **No Permanent Western Presence**

Although Chinese leaders have not challenged the legitimacy of the NATO military operations in Afghanistan and the PRC delegation to the UN Security Council has voted several times to renew ISAF's mandate, the Chinese government has not formally supported maintaining a long-term Western military presence in the country or the Central Asian region. In the past, the lack of formal ties between China and NATO made it difficult for the two parties even to discuss regional security cooperation. Unlike the former Soviet republics, China does not participate separately in the alliance's Partnership for Peace program. Although Beijing does discuss proliferation and other security issues with NATO intermittently, this dialogue occurs with the PRC Foreign Ministry rather than the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and other more influential elements of China's national security establishment.<sup>73</sup> Chinese commentators have expressed concern about NATO's ambitions to establish a global security presence.<sup>74</sup> During the early years of the NATO campaign in Afghanistan, the main Chinese fear was that the United States was trying to sustain an enduring military presence to China's west as an element of a containment strategy aiming to encircle the

---

<sup>70</sup> Pan Guang: "China and Central Asia: Charting a New Course for Regional Cooperation," *China Brief*, Vol. 7, No. 3, February 7, 2007.

<sup>71</sup> "Xi's speech on China-Central Asia ties catches global attention," *China Daily*, September 8, 2013, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013xivisitcenterasia/2013-09/08/content\\_16952731.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013xivisitcenterasia/2013-09/08/content_16952731.htm).

<sup>72</sup> Simon Denyer, "China bypasses American 'New Silk Road' with two of its own," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/china-bypasses-american-new-silk-road-with-two-if-its-own/2013/10/14/49f9f60c-3284-11e3-ad00-ec4c6b31cbcd\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-bypasses-american-new-silk-road-with-two-if-its-own/2013/10/14/49f9f60c-3284-11e3-ad00-ec4c6b31cbcd_story.html).

<sup>73</sup> Andrew Small, "China's Af-Pak Moment," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 20, 2009, [http://www.gmfus.org/doc/Small\\_Af-Pak\\_Brief\\_0509\\_final.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/doc/Small_Af-Pak_Brief_0509_final.pdf).

<sup>74</sup> "Bao Jie et al, "What is the intention for NATO to build 'global partnership'?" Xinhua, April 28, 2006, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2006-04/29/content\\_4490342.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2006-04/29/content_4490342.htm).

PRC with U.S. military forces and allies.<sup>75</sup> Chinese analysts also faulted NATO for failing to defeat the Taliban or suppress Afghan narcotics trafficking despite conducting a decade-long counterinsurgency campaign.

However, Chinese policymakers have become more comfortable over time with the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. They have *de facto* accepted the U.S. and NATO combat roles in Afghanistan since 2001. They certainly do not want Islamist militants to triumph there, since they could then use these territories to spread extremism within the PRC. Chinese officials have also traditionally avoided challenging the United States on core security issues—and the Obama administration has clearly identified the Afghan theater as such. Having the U.S. forces take the lead in fighting Islamists insurgents in Afghanistan and elsewhere also relieves China of having to fight them directly. Chinese policymakers prefer that the United States and its allies bear the burden of countering radical Islamist movements outside of China. Chinese analysts recognize that, on balance, they have benefited from the NATO military efforts in Afghanistan while bearing no direct costs. While U.S. pressure has induced many of Afghanistan's neighbors to grant the Pentagon military bases and transit rights, and has led many other countries to provide combat forces for the unpopular war, China has been able to benefit from these military exertions without having to contribute to them. PRC officials have resisted U.S. and NATO pressure to contribute PLA forces to ISAF, send police trainers to Kabul or allow the Pentagon to send military supplies to Afghanistan through Chinese territory (the Wakhan Corridor is often cited as a possible route). In effect, Chinese firms have enjoyed NATO's protection from local terrorists without China's having to contribute its own combat forces or incur other major costs. PRC officials further appreciate that the stalemated wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have served the useful purpose of diverting Washington's attention away from the Asia-Pacific region, presenting fewer obstacles to the Beijing's ambitions in that region.<sup>76</sup>

In recent years, Chinese concerns have increasingly focused on fears of a premature U.S./NATO combat withdrawal, which PRC policymakers see as leaving them to clean up a mess not of their own creation.<sup>77</sup> PRC officials are eager to avert an excessively precipitous NATO pullout from Afghanistan. For example, after President Barack Obama announced plans to begin removing U.S. troops from Afghanistan toward a complete transfer of responsibility for security to Afghan forces in mid-2014 at a 2011 Security Council meeting, Wang Min, deputy permanent representative of the PRC Mission to the UN, warned against a hasty transition.<sup>78</sup> More recently, Chinese officials have encouraged President Karzai and potential successors to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the United States. Implementing the BSA, which does not grant the Pentagon permanent bases in Afghanistan, is a prerequisite for other Western militaries to remain in the country to conduct a post-ISAF mission focused on training the Afghan National Security

---

<sup>75</sup> "China has been surrounded: 80 thousand NATO forces move into Afghanistan," *Huanqiu*, [http://military.china.com/zh\\_cn/important/11052771/20080412/14781564\\_1.html](http://military.china.com/zh_cn/important/11052771/20080412/14781564_1.html).008.

<sup>76</sup> For more on this last point see Kurt M. Campbell, Nirav Patel and Richard Weitz, "The Ripple Effect: China's Responses to the Iraq War," Center for a New American Security, Washington, DC, October 2008, <http://www.cnas.org/publications/working-papers/the-ripple-effect-china-s-responses-to-the-iraq-war#.VAp04OI0y21>

<sup>77</sup> Liu Dake, "U.S. withdraws, Afghanistan becomes the ultimate burden for China?," *Global Times*, February 1, 2013, [http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion\\_world/2013-02/3607416.html](http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2013-02/3607416.html).

<sup>78</sup> "China urges peaceful transition in Afghanistan," *China Daily*, July 7, 2011, [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-07/07/content\\_12851965.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-07/07/content_12851965.htm).



Forces (ANSF). Without any Western troops, foreign economic assistance to Afghanistan could fall even more rapidly and extensively than its current downward glide path. A stronger ANSF could better promote Chinese economic and security interests in Afghanistan and its neighbors. Since China is unwilling to train and equip the Afghan National Army (ANA) itself, Beijing wants other countries to assume that burden.

PRC officials have preferred that the entire international community, as many countries as possible, support Afghanistan's independence and development with aid, diplomacy and other measures. They have encouraged the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia and the United Nations to cooperate with the Afghan government to suppress terrorism and the drug trade and promote the country's socioeconomic development. China has welcomed the massive Western economic and security assistance to Afghanistan and Pakistan over the past decade. The amount of Western aid has considerably exceeded the sums that China is willing to provide to even its close ally Pakistan. At the same time, China has sought to show that it actively contributes to promote peace and prosperity in Afghanistan. In the economic realm, some PRC firms are helping to develop Afghanistan's physical infrastructure and natural resources. Beijing has provided modest development aid to Afghanistan, and engaged in limited training of the Afghan National Police. Most recently, China has designated a special envoy for the country and agreed to host relevant international meetings, such as a ministerial session of the Istanbul Process. Yet China's security ties with Afghanistan remain much less developed than those between the PRC and many other Central and South Asian governments. Chinese officials have ignored repeated requests by U.S. and Afghan officials to permit NATO to send supplies, even only non-lethal ones such as food and clothing, through Chinese territory to Afghanistan. Beijing's reluctance to side openly with NATO in Afghanistan reflects a fear of antagonizing the Taliban and other Islamist militant groups, which could retaliate against the PRC's economic interests in Afghanistan or by encouraging militarism among the PRC's Muslim minority. According to one Chinese scholar, "China is unconvinced that the Taliban can be destroyed by military means," and has instead tried to adopt a strategy that avoids "provoking direct conflict with the Taliban."<sup>79</sup> While the Taliban's terrorist activities certainly affect Chinese investments in Afghanistan, PRC officials believe in the long run that their "avoidance strategy" will deflect Taliban targeting of Chinese citizens in Afghanistan.<sup>80</sup> China has also been able to free ride on Western economic aid and military operations in Afghanistan, which has yielded benefits to China with few costs.

---

<sup>79</sup> Zhao Huasheng: "China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances and Perspectives," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, March 2012.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

## Part II: China's Afghan Strategy: Tactics, Techniques and Troubles

China's challenge in Afghanistan is that its ability to free ride on Western efforts in Afghanistan is declining and it does not have an assured alternative strategy or strong economic, diplomatic or military tools to secure its interests in Afghanistan by itself. The Chinese government has been strengthening its tools and seems prepared to adjust its strategy, but thus far these changes, and China's influence over Afghan events, remain modest. Chinese investors are as reluctant as others to invest in Afghanistan until its security situation improves. The PLA has no on-the-ground presence in Afghanistan and even China's training of Afghan police officers occurs outside the country. The SCO and other multinational institutions where China has a dominant influence also lack strong policy instruments. Though Russia and India have been expanding their activities in Afghanistan, Chinese policy coordination with these countries remains weak and intermittent, as does China's continued limited engagement with NATO countries on Afghan issues. Compounding these issues, and to Beijing's regret, Pakistan also remains a problematic partner. Beyond state-to-state engagement, economic incentives and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan have met with mixed success.

### Frustrated Economic Objectives

The Chinese government has tried to help Afghanistan develop economically through aid, trade and bilateral investment. But China has committed only modest resources to this effort, given the challenging nature of Afghanistan's economic climate; better commercial and resource opportunities elsewhere; and an appreciation that many other donors are already providing Afghanistan with much more economic assistance than China could ever reasonably hope to supply. Altogether, PRC officials have pledged only about a billion dollars in development assistance to Afghanistan and actually dispersed an even smaller amount.<sup>81</sup> Soon after the establishment of the country's post-Taliban government, Beijing waived all Afghanistan's earlier debts to China.<sup>82</sup> More recent aid has supported the building of schools, hospitals, and a few high-profile reconstruction projects.<sup>83</sup> Chinese-supported projects have included an irrigation complex at Parwan, Jamhuriat Hospital in Kabul and a conference hall in the presidential palace.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, since July 2006, the PRC has allowed hundreds of Afghan products to enter China without tariffs.<sup>85</sup> China has also trained hundreds of Afghan officials in a range of areas, ranging from diplomacy to counter narcotics, and from agriculture to health care.<sup>86</sup>

Relations between China and Afghanistan have become increasingly warm since 2012, when China started making overtures to Afghanistan to strengthen ties, and the two countries entered a

---

<sup>81</sup> Elizabeth Wishnick, "Greater Sino-American cooperation needed in Afghanistan," *China US Focus*, August 4, 2011, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/greater-sino-american-cooperation-needed-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>82</sup> "China vows to continue support to Afghanistan's reconstruction," *People's Daily Online*, January 27, 2010, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6879623.html>.

<sup>83</sup> "Karzai and Hu Jintao discuss energy and Islamic extremism," *AsiaNews.it*, March 25, 2010, <http://asianews.it/news-en/Karzai-and-Hu-Jintao-discuss-energy-and-Islamic-extremism-17978.html>.

<sup>84</sup> "Chinese president pledges support for Afghan reconstruction," Chinese Government Official Web Portal, August 15, 2007, [http://english.gov.cn/2007-08/15/content\\_718034.htm](http://english.gov.cn/2007-08/15/content_718034.htm).

<sup>85</sup> "China expects to see peace, stability and development in Afghanistan," *China.org.cn*, March 25, 2010, [http://china.org.cn/world/2010-03/25/content\\_19688043.htm](http://china.org.cn/world/2010-03/25/content_19688043.htm).

<sup>86</sup> "China vows to continue support to Afghanistan's reconstruction," *People's Daily Online*, January 27, 2010, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6879623.html>.

strategic and co-operative partnership.<sup>87</sup> President Karzai characterized China as a reliable neighbor and affirmed Afghans' commitment to build enduring friendship and cooperation between their two countries.<sup>88</sup> The Afghan public may not necessarily share the same rosy view of China as Afghan officials.<sup>89</sup> But as the Western presence decreases, Afghans have increasingly hoped that Chinese investment in the Afghan economy will help rehabilitate the country.<sup>90</sup> Karzai has frequently expressed Afghanistan's appreciation of China's contribution to reconstruction, and emphasized hopes for continued Chinese development support.<sup>91</sup> Afghans consider China sufficiently wealthy to be able to provide substantial reconstruction aid and invest in Afghanistan's natural and mineral resources.<sup>92</sup> However, on balance, Chinese businesses now consider Afghanistan to be a security risk rather than an economic prospect.<sup>93</sup>

Official Chinese foreign development aid has also lagged behind expectations. As of April 2014, the total amount of Chinese reconstruction aid to Afghanistan since 2001 amounted to \$250 million.<sup>94</sup> This is a small amount when compared to the billions of dollars given by the United States, European governments and even the \$2 billion in aid given by India. However, based on Afghan newspaper articles, Afghans appear to take a favorable view of Chinese contributions to reconstruction, despite the relatively modest amount contributed.<sup>95</sup> Nevertheless the Chinese approach suffers from a problem afflicting many other foreign projects in Afghanistan: Funds are frequently offered to build a facility but not to maintain it. For example, although Chinese workers constructed a new 350-bed, 10-story building for Jamhuriat hospital in 2004, it remained unused since the Afghan government did not have the funds or trained staff to operate it.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> "China and Afghanistan sign economic and security deals," BBC, September 23, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-19693005>.

<sup>88</sup> "Chinese president meets Afghan President Hamid Karzai," Xinhua, May 19, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-05/19/c\\_133345358.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-05/19/c_133345358.htm); and "Chinese, Afghan leaders meet on enhancing economic and security cooperation," Xinhua, September 28, 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/video/2013-09/28/c\\_132758071.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/video/2013-09/28/c_132758071.htm).

<sup>89</sup> Akio Kawato, "The China Factor in Afghanistan: 2014," Carnegie Endowment Eurasia Outlook, October 25, 2013. <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=53424>.

<sup>90</sup> Frud Bezhan, "Restoring Its Legacy, Moscow Invests In Future In Afghanistan, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 31, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-moscow-invests-in-future/25315632.html>.

<sup>91</sup> See for instance: "Chinese president meets Afghan President Hamid Karzai," Xinhua, May 19, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-05/19/c\\_133345358.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-05/19/c_133345358.htm); "Chinese, Afghan leaders meet on enhancing economic and security cooperation," Xinhua, September 28, 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/video/2013-09/28/c\\_132758071.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/video/2013-09/28/c_132758071.htm); and "Chinese president holds talks with Afghan counterpart," Xinhua, September 27, 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-09/27/c\\_125462453.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-09/27/c_125462453.htm).

<sup>92</sup> Tahir Khan, "China's interest in Afghanistan could bode well for both countries," *The Express Tribune*, July 26, 2014, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/740970/chinas-interest-in-afghanistan-could-bode-well-for-both-countries/>.

<sup>93</sup> William Dalrymple, "Afghanistan: as China forges new alliances, a new Great Game has begun," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/18/afghanistan-china-new-great-game-united-states>.

<sup>94</sup> "China emerges as key strategic player in Afghanistan," Khaama Press, April 14, 2014, <http://www.khaama.com/china-emerges-as-key-strategic-player-in-afghanistan-3574>

<sup>95</sup> See for instance, "China, a good neighbour and permanent friend," *Anis Daily*, February 10, 2014, BBC Worldwide Monitoring, February 14, 2014.

<sup>96</sup> Zarghona Salehi, "New building for Jamhuriat hospital to open soon: Dalil," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, April 5, 2011, <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2011/04/06/new-building-jamhuriat-hospital-open-soon-dalil>.

China's high-profile economic projects in Afghanistan have also suffered from Afghanistan's insecurity and other challenges. Sino-Afghan economic ties remain modest. In particular, Chinese companies have proved unable or unwilling to execute all the options in their investment contracts, and many of their infrastructure and mining projects in Afghanistan remain stalled. At one time, Western and Afghan analysts thought that Chinese firms would prove willing to accept greater risks than their Western competitors in investing in Afghanistan, as they have in Africa and other developing regions. In the words of Peter Galbraith, former deputy head of the UN mission to Afghanistan, "Western companies are exceptionally timid when it comes to operating in places where there is even the remotest hint that it might be a little risky, and the Chinese are not and are willing to go to these places."<sup>97</sup> But the managers of Chinese firms, even state-run enterprises, are reluctant to operate in places where they might lose money and where their employees are at high risk of being killed or kidnapped. China's \$3 -billion copper mining project in Aynak is located in Logar, which remains one of Afghanistan's most violent provinces.<sup>98</sup> Whatever the truth of the perception that Chinese enterprises are willing to accept higher short-term risks for greater long-run returns, this has not proven to be the case recently in Afghanistan and some other conflict zones—suggesting that we need to rethink this hypothesis.

### **Constrained Bilateral Security Ties**

Chinese representatives have expressed interest in assisting the Afghan government to counter the Taliban insurgency and the country's narcotics trade. In a speech to the International Conference in Support of Afghanistan in Paris in June 2008, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi stated that the PRC "would continue to enhance cooperation with Afghanistan on law enforcement and intelligence sharing and take an active part in the international efforts to set up an anti-drug security belt" and that "capacity building and personnel training have always been the focus in China's assistance to Afghanistan."<sup>99</sup> Similarly, State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan has affirmed that, since peace and stability in Afghanistan is in the interest of China as well as the rest of the world, the PRC is prepared "to strengthen cooperation with Afghanistan on non-traditional security issues and support Afghanistan to play an active role in regional affairs."<sup>100</sup>

China has engaged in limited military training of the ANSF in several areas. For example, officials from the Afghan defense ministry have participated in various training courses run by the PLA.<sup>101</sup> The PLA's University of Science and Technology in Nanjing offers ANA personnel a mine-clearing training course.<sup>102</sup> Meanwhile, the Public Security Ministry has provided technical

---

<sup>97</sup> David Randall and Jonathan Owen, "An IoS investigation: To the Chinese and the Indians, the spoils of a terrible war," *The Independent*, March 18, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/an-ios-investigation-to-the-chinese-and-the-indians-the-spoils-of-a-terrible-war-7576426.html>.

<sup>98</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Washington, DC, November 2013, [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/October\\_1230\\_Report\\_Master\\_Nov7.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/October_1230_Report_Master_Nov7.pdf).

<sup>99</sup> "China supports Afghanistan in reconstruction, development," Xinhua, June 13, 2008, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-06/13/content\\_8357399.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-06/13/content_8357399.htm).

<sup>100</sup> "China pledges continued support to Afghanistan's reconstruction," Xinhua, August 20, 2007, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-08/20/content\\_6570572.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-08/20/content_6570572.htm).

<sup>101</sup> "China provides mine clearing training to Iraq and Afghanistan," Xinhua, October 15, 2009, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6784723.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Tim Sullivan, "Who's Going to Win in Afghanistan? China," AEI: Center for Defense Studies, Washington, DC, May 14, 2010, <http://www.defensestudies.org/cds/who's-going-to-win-in-afghanistan-china/>.

assistance to Afghanistan's counter-narcotics program.<sup>103</sup> On September 23, 2012, then-security chief Zhou Yongkang, at the time a member of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee, became the first high-ranking PRC official to visit Afghanistan since 1966. During his visit, the two countries reached several agreements, including one in which the Public Security Ministry pledged to train 300 Afghan police over the next four years.<sup>104</sup> At a meeting between Karzai and Hu in June 2012, the two governments agreed that their new China-Afghanistan Strategic and Cooperative Partnership would include the goal of enhancing "intelligence exchanges and border management" to help provide greater security.<sup>105</sup> In July 2014, Special Envoy Sun stated that PRC would provide the ANSF with communications and logistical support and equipment.<sup>106</sup>

It is possible that China may keep some of its defense and military support to Afghanistan discreet, without much public disclosure so as not to antagonize terrorist groups, but thus far there has been no concrete evidence that China has contributed significantly even in this limited aspect. To all appearances, China's security ties with Afghanistan remain much less developed than those between the PRC and many other Central and South Asian governments, though they do resemble Beijing's policies in Iraq, which have focused on investing in the energy sector while shunning any major security role. China does not conduct on-site military training in Afghanistan or joint military exercises between the PLA and the ANA. Beijing has yet to offer to cover any of the \$4 billion required annually to sustain the ANSF. PRC officials have cited their country's noninterference policy to reject Afghan and NATO requests for greater PRC security assistance to Afghanistan.<sup>107</sup> However, despite this limited aid, China's support for peace and stability in Afghanistan enjoys some favorable coverage in the Afghan media, which depicts China as eschewing participation in the kinds of "Great Game" politics regularly played by other foreign powers.<sup>108</sup>

Rather than try to render assistance to the ISAF, Chinese policymakers have sought retain their status as at worst a secondary target of Eurasian extremist groups, after the United States and its Western and local allies.<sup>109</sup> Concerns about becoming a higher priority target have given Beijing a strong reason to avoid being perceived as assisting the NATO mission in Afghanistan. A week after the July 2009 Uyghur-Han riots, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson insisted that:

---

<sup>103</sup> Jae H. Ku, Drew Thompson and Daniel Wertz: "Northeast Asia in Afghanistan: Whose Silk Road?" *U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS and Center for the National Interest Joint Report*, March 2011, pp. 15-16.

<sup>104</sup> "China and Afghanistan sign economic and security deals," BBC, September 23, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-19693005>.

<sup>105</sup> "Joint Declaration between The People's Republic of China and The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Establishing Strategic and Cooperative Partnership," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, June 12, 2012, <http://www.mfa.gov.af/en/News/10504>.

<sup>106</sup> "China supports reconciliation process in Afghanistan: Envoy," *Daily Times* [Lahore], July 28, 2014, <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/national/28-Jul-2014/china-supports-reconciliation-process-in-afghanistan-envoy>.

<sup>107</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Viewpoint: India risks destabilizing Afghanistan," BBC, May 6, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27258566>.

<sup>108</sup> See for instance: "China, a good neighbor and permanent friend," *Anis Daily*, February 10, 2014, BBC Worldwide Monitoring, February 14, 2014.

<sup>109</sup> Andrew Small, "China's Af-Pak Moment," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 20, 2009, [http://www.gmfus.org/doc/Small\\_Af-Pak\\_Brief\\_0509\\_final.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/doc/Small_Af-Pak_Brief_0509_final.pdf).

We hope that the Islamic countries and our Muslim brothers could see the truth of July 5 incident in Urumqi, and I believe if they do so, they will surely understand and support China's ethnic and religious policy and the measures adopted to handle the incident. China and the Islamic countries have long been respecting and supporting each other and the Chinese Government and people always firmly support the just cause of the Islamic countries to pursue national independence and safeguard state sovereignty. We enjoy profound basis for our relations, one of which is that we respect, understand and support major concerns and core interests of each other.<sup>110</sup>

This strategic thinking was clearly illustrated on January 16, 2010, when two Chinese engineers working on a road-building project in northeast Afghanistan were kidnapped by alleged Taliban members, who demanded a ransom to release them.<sup>111</sup> PRC media reported that "Chinese analysts said they are perplexed, as they believe that it is not Taliban strategy to challenge China."<sup>112</sup> Beijing seeks good relations with the governments of Muslim-majority countries in order to secure access to their natural resources and their diplomatic support in general. In this context, PRC policymakers do not want to take the lead in supporting an Afghan military operation that is sometimes characterized as an ethnic or religious conflict, with Islamist extremists denouncing the endeavor as an international anti-Muslim crusade. When discussing proposals that the PRC contribute more to coalition efforts to attack Taliban and al-Qaeda elements in Afghanistan, Pan Zhiping, the director of the Central Asia Research Institute at the Xinjiang Social Science Academy, wondered, "Why would you make yourself the target of global terrorist organizations?"<sup>113</sup> It was reported in 2012 that China had communicated with some Taliban elements, via Pakistan's military, with the objective of persuading the Taliban not to support or provide safe havens to Uyghur terrorists in a post-2014 context.<sup>114</sup>

The Taliban have recognized and exploited this Chinese concern. In emails to a Pakistani columnist in July 2014, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid indicated that his movement had no issues with regard to Chinese involvement in Afghanistan because China remain uninvolved militarily in the conflict, and that the Taliban therefore would not target Chinese projects: "We have no problems with China, as it has never interfered in Afghanistan. The Chinese will be safe."<sup>115</sup> Whereas Western governments believe that disorder in Afghanistan threatens their

---

<sup>110</sup> Oin Gang, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference on July 2009," Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in New York, July 14, 2009, <http://newyork.china-consulate.org/eng/fyrth/t573182.htm>.

<sup>111</sup> Eltaf Najafizada, "Afghan Taliban Seek Ransom for Two Kidnapped Chinese (Update1)," Bloomberg, January 19, 2010, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aXZ3afbjejtA>.

<sup>112</sup> "2 Chinese Engineers Kidnapped by Taliban," *China Daily*, January 19, 2010, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-01/19/content\\_9339630.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-01/19/content_9339630.htm).

<sup>113</sup> Russell Hsiao and Glen E. Howard, "China Builds Closer Ties to Afghanistan through Wakhan Corridor," *China Brief*, Vol.10, No. 1, January 2010, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=35879&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7#.VApjv-10y20](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35879&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7#.VApjv-10y20).

<sup>114</sup> Jane Perlez, "China Shows Interest in Afghan Security, Fearing Taliban Would Help Separatists," *New York Times*, June 8, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/09/world/asia/china-signals-interest-in-afghanistan-after-nato-leaves.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/09/world/asia/china-signals-interest-in-afghanistan-after-nato-leaves.html?_r=0).

<sup>115</sup> Tahir Khan, "China's interest in Afghanistan could bode well for both countries," *The Express Tribune*, July 26, 2014, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/740970/chinas-interest-in-afghanistan-could-bode-well-for-both-countries/>.

homelands by giving international terrorist groups a base of operations, PRC policymakers seem to believe that they can sustain a *de facto* non-aggression pact with the Afghan Taliban. If China does not threaten the Taliban, Beijing hopes, the Taliban will reciprocate and treat PRC territory as off-limits.

### Arm's Length Relationship with NATO

While declining to join or support NATO's military operations in Afghanistan, Chinese policymakers have sought to avoid antagonizing Western powers. PRC and U.S. representatives have repeatedly agreed to collaborate on Afghanistan. In April 2009, the U.S. envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, held two days of talks with senior Chinese officials in Beijing, including Foreign Minister Yang. Holbrooke declared that, "We came here to share views on the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan because we share a common danger, a common challenge and a common goal."<sup>116</sup> Although less effusive, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu observed, "The two sides said they would make efforts to enhance dialogue and cooperation and promote peace, stability and development in South Asia."<sup>117</sup> Chinese government representatives have held consultations with NATO forces regarding the security of its Aynak copper venture.<sup>118</sup> In the November 2009 Joint Statement issued during President Obama's visit to Beijing, the two governments said that they "welcomed all efforts conducive to peace, stability and development in South Asia. They support the efforts of Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight terrorism, maintain domestic stability and achieve sustainable economic and social development, and support the improvement and growth of relations between India and Pakistan. The two sides are ready to strengthen communication, dialogue and cooperation on issues related to South Asia and work together to promote peace, stability and development in that region."<sup>119</sup>

Yet PRC officials have continued to reject suggestions that they contribute combat forces to ISAF or other NATO military operations in Afghanistan. After British Prime Minister Gordon Brown remarked at a November 2008 meeting of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York that Chinese troops might deploy to Afghanistan in the future, PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Qin Gang rapidly dismissed the proposal.<sup>120</sup> In March 2009, Qin reaffirmed that, "Except for peace-keeping missions approved by the Security Council, China will not send a single soldier overseas."<sup>121</sup> In the case of these UN-mandated missions, the PRC has provided only logistics and other support personnel, never combat troops. On some occasions, various PLA officers and PRC officials have indicated that they might contribute non-combat soldiers such as engineers, demining specialists, medical units and civilian police personnel to an UN-mandated peacekeeping

---

<sup>116</sup> "China, U.S. to try to cooperate on Pakistan, Afghanistan," Agence France-Presse, April 17, 2009, <http://www.dawn.com/news/855642/china-us-to-promote-dialogue>.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Andrew Small, "China's Af-Pak Moment," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 20, 2009, [http://www.gmfus.org/doc/Small\\_Af-Pak\\_Brief\\_0509\\_final.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/doc/Small_Af-Pak_Brief_0509_final.pdf).

<sup>119</sup> "U.S.-China Joint Statement," White House Office of the Press Secretary, November 17, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-china-joint-statement>.

<sup>120</sup> Melinda Liu, "Could China Play a Role in Afghanistan?" *Newsweek*, November 21, 2008, <http://www.newsweek.com/could-china-play-role-afghanistan-85017>.

<sup>121</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference on March 24, 2009," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 24, 2009, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t553628.htm>.

operation in Afghanistan.<sup>122</sup> But the UN Security Council, in which Beijing has the right to veto decisions, has yet to authorize such a peacekeeping mission. Then-Defense Minister Liang Guanglie offered only limited military assistance when he met Afghan Defense Minister Rahim Wardak during Karzai's March 2010 state visit to China. Liang's offer included the provision of additional Chinese defense supplies and military training, but not direct combat support such as provided by the more than three dozen countries that have participated in the ISAF.<sup>123</sup>

The PRC has also dismissed inquiries about whether NATO could send supplies, even only non-lethal ones such as food, clothing and construction material, through Chinese territory to Afghanistan. The Chinese government never acted on a formal proposal by the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, made in 2009 to the Foreign Ministry, to permit private commercial carriers, unaccompanied by U.S. soldiers, to convey "non-lethal" supplies for NATO militaries through western China into Central Asia and then use the existing Northern Distribution Network to reach Afghanistan.<sup>124</sup> When NATO's difficulties in supplying its troops in Afghanistan led a U.S. official to remark in March of that year that the alliance was considering seeking Beijing's help in providing an alternative logistics route through western China into Afghanistan, the PRC Ambassador to Germany, Ma Canrong, insisted that Beijing would need more extensive consultations with NATO before offering any concrete support.<sup>125</sup>

Other proposals to allow NATO countries to transport supplies through PRC territory to their ISAF contingents have focused on the remote, mountainous Wakhan Corridor, a part of Afghanistan created in 1895–1896 by the Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission to serve as a buffer between Imperial Russia and British India.<sup>126</sup> It is 200 kilometers long and varies from 20 to 60 kilometers wide along its length. The corridor encompasses much of Badakhshan province in northeast Afghanistan up to its narrow border with the PRC's Xinjiang province. It adjoins Tajikistan on its north and Pakistan on its south. The corridor is physically impassible for most of the year due to ice and snow. Even when weather conditions are favorable, the terrain is not. The lowest point along the mountain range, the Wakhir Pass, is more than 5,000 meters above sea level. Besides this challenging topography and climate, a lack of major roads traversing the 76-km China-Afghan frontier is another limit. PRC border security forces heavily regulate any traffic to control the infiltration of narcotics or potential terrorists.<sup>127</sup>

After assuming office, the current administration asked China to allow the Pentagon to ship military supplies to its forces in Afghanistan through the Wakhan Corridor.<sup>128</sup> If established, this

---

<sup>122</sup> Jae H. Ku, Drew Thompson and Daniel Wertz: "Northeast Asia in Afghanistan: Whose Silk Road?" *U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS and Center for the National Interest Joint Report*, March 2011, p. 11.

<sup>123</sup> "China, Afghanistan vow to fight terrorism, drugs," AFP, March 25, 2010, <http://pakistanpal.livejournal.com/675452.html>.

<sup>124</sup> "U.S. Afghan supply via China-route bid rebuffed," *International: The News*, July 3, 2011, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/article-18010-US-Afghan-supply-via-China-bid-rebuffed>.

<sup>125</sup> "China says support for NATO effort unlikely now," HighBeam Research, March 5, 2009, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1A1-D96NKRS00.html>.

<sup>126</sup> "Key facts about the Wakhan Corridor," Reuters, June 12, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/06/12/idUSSP389507>.

<sup>127</sup> "Relations between China and Afghanistan," Reuters, March 22, 2010, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2010/03/22/idINIndia-47116320100322>.

<sup>128</sup> Peter Peng, "Will China Open Wakhan Corridor to U.S.?", *Comments on Asia*, December 29, 2010, <http://peterpeng210.blogspot.com/2009/12/will-china-open-wakhan-corridor-to-us.html>; and Anthony Kuhn, "China



PRC-Afghan supply route would have complemented the two existing supply corridors used by the United States and other NATO countries. The oldest route, and largest by volume, flows from Pakistan's ports through the Khyber Pass into Afghanistan, but has been constantly attacked by guerrillas operating along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and has been interrupted by the Pakistani government in retaliation for U.S. actions that upset Islamabad. A newer northern route conveys supplies through the territory of Russia and several Central Asian countries but is physically longer, more expensive and subject to political risks of closure by Moscow and other regional governments. Afghan officials have also asked the PRC government to open the corridor and proposed constructing a road or railroad through it.<sup>129</sup> Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfar Spanta suggested using it as a NATO logistics route in a speech he delivered at a Beijing think tank in June 2009.<sup>130</sup> PRC officials agreed to study the issue.<sup>131</sup> So far, the Wakhan Corridor has remained closed to military supplies or significant non-military traffic. The Chinese government has improved the transportation and security infrastructure on its side of the corridor, but these efforts appear aimed at strengthening China's defense capabilities along the border rather than encouraging greater commerce across it.<sup>132</sup> Concerns about terrorism and drug smuggling have given China a strong reason to keep the border closed. In addition, Western officials never pushed very hard for opening the corridor since they were able to cobble together an effective Northern Distribution Network to supplement the flow of goods through Pakistan. But perhaps the most important reason that the Chinese government has refused to provide even this modest level of visible support for the coalition's war effort has been fear of making Beijing a more prominent target for foreign Islamist militants. PRC officials prefer to keep a low profile in the war, leaving NATO in charge of the counterinsurgency effort, and avoid any actions that excessively antagonize the Afghan Taliban, hedging against their possible return to power.

In representing China's stance, the PRC media has cited reluctance to associate China too closely with NATO and U.S. military stabilization efforts in Afghanistan by allowing NATO governments to deliver supplies through the corridor or providing other military assistance to coalition military forces.<sup>133</sup> Suspicions about U.S. efforts to secure a Chinese military contribution were evident in a November 2009 commentary published in the pro-Beijing Hong Kong newspaper *Wen Wei Po*, which argued that, "In the final analysis, the U.S. wants to take advantage of China to fight the Taliban." In its view, the Obama administration would simply have the PLA fight the insurgents while denying them even the benefit of learning about American combat tactics and procedures: "The U.S. military obviously does not want to engage in any joint actions with the Chinese army in Afghanistan (or anywhere else); this is to prevent the Chinese from learning American command

---

Becomes A Player In Afghanistan's Future," NPR, October 21, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113967842>.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> "Afghanistan tells China to open Wakhan corridor route," Afghanistan News Center, June 11, 2009, <http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2009/june/jun112009.html#8>.

<sup>131</sup> "Relations between Afghanistan and China," Reuters, October 4, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/10/04/us-afghanistan-china-fb-idUSTRE79325D20111004>.

<sup>132</sup> Russell Hsiao and Glen E. Howard: "China Builds Closer Ties to Afghanistan through Wakhan Corridor," *China Brief*, Vol.10, No. 1, January 2010,

<sup>133</sup> "America Invites China To Send Troops To Afghanistan Based On Suspicious Motives, China Unequivocally Refuses," Sina News, January 8, 2010 <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2010-01-08/1500580018.html>.

and communication systems and techniques.”<sup>134</sup> An anonymous “People’s Liberation Army officer and researcher at a top military think tank” commented that NATO could hardly expect the PRC to provide direct support for its military operations when the alliance “did not seek China’s opinion when it deployed its forces in Afghanistan in the first place.” Although he welcomed the development of some ties with NATO, the unnamed officer warned that “China should be cautious not to be taken advantage of.”<sup>135</sup>

Chinese officials clearly prefer to engage Afghanistan economically, so they try to depict a harmonious relationship in which the PRC’s pursuit of its commercial goals helps promote peace and prosperity in Afghanistan. During Karzai’s visit in March 2010, the media quoted several Afghan experts as emphasizing that Chinese economic assistance and investment in Afghanistan would help promote their country’s security as well as prosperity. For example, a professor at Al-Bironi University, Abdul Qahar Sarwari, reportedly said that, by investing in development projects, the PRC would reduce unemployment and poverty Afghanistan, which he termed the “mother of all evils, including insurgency and insecurity.” Arguing that unemployed young people join the Taliban and other guerrilla forces simply to provide food for their families, Sarwari reportedly said that, “Providing jobs and regular income to citizens would alleviate poverty and eventually slim the ongoing insurgency in the country.”<sup>136</sup> PRC media similarly quoted Qasim Akhgar, described as a human rights activist and editor-in-chief of an influential newspaper, as saying that Chinese investment would improve Afghanistan’s security situation by raising living standards.<sup>137</sup>

China’s limited support for the NATO-U.S.-Afghan counterinsurgency campaign, despite its increased economic stake in Afghanistan, has provoked some irritation among Western observers about China’s “free riding” on the expenditure of European, American and Afghan lives and money. S. Frederick Starr, the chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, has observed that some might see the situation as “We do the heavy lifting... And they pick the fruit.”<sup>138</sup> Similarly, Robert D. Kaplan noted the irony that, “We are paying in blood and treasure to stabilize Afghanistan, while China is building transport and pipeline network throughout Central Asia that will ultimately reach Kabul and the trillion dollars’ worth of minerals lying underground.”<sup>139</sup> As long as NATO governments are experiencing difficulties defending the Afghan government against the Taliban, they will pressure Beijing for greater assistance. Following the first U.S.-China Defense Policy Coordination Talks under the Obama administration in February 2009, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, David Sedney, remarked that, “This is an

---

<sup>134</sup> He Liangliang, “U.S. Requests Allied Countries to Increase Troops in Afghanistan,” *Watching America*, November 27, 2009, <http://www.watchingamerica.com/News/38814/u-s-requests-allied-countries-to-increase-troops-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>135</sup> Cheng Guangjin and Cai Xiao, “NATO seeks Chinese rebuilding help for Kabul,” *China Daily*, March 25, 2010, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-03/25/content\\_9637954.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-03/25/content_9637954.htm).

<sup>136</sup> Abdul Haleem, “China’s investment to supplement stabilizing process in Afghanistan,” *Xinhua*, March 23, 2010, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-03/23/c\\_13221821.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-03/23/c_13221821.htm).

<sup>137</sup> Haleem, “China’s investment to supplement.”

<sup>138</sup> Michael Wines, “Uneasy Engagement: China Willing to Spend Big on Afghan Commerce,” *The New York Times*, December 29, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/30/world/asia/30mine.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>139</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “While U.S. is distracted, China develops sea power,” *The Washington Post*, September 26, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/24/AR2010092404767.html>.

area where we're looking to see more contributions from the international community—and of course ... this means China—to assist in the many, many needs that are in Afghanistan.”<sup>140</sup>

*China Daily* cited NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen as recognizing in 2010 China’s “key role in civilian development in Afghanistan” which, more than military operations, would ensure Afghanistan’s “long-term peace and stability.”<sup>141</sup> Like Afghan officials, NATO officials have welcomed any legal foreign investment in Afghanistan that generates employment for Afghans outside the narcotics or terrorism industries and that increases the resources available to its beleaguered government. “It can be a good thing. As a matter of fact, we encourage all of the international community to take an interest in the economic development of Afghanistan,” U.S. State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid explained. “Working with our coalition partners and other interested partners, we are trying to establish a viable market economy in Afghanistan. This is one way to wean people from illicit activities and also to fight the ideology of the terrorists.”<sup>142</sup> Meanwhile, U.S. and NATO representatives have ceased trying to secure any meaningful Chinese military assistance in Afghanistan and have focused instead on obtaining some Chinese funding for the ANSF, albeit equally unsuccessfully.<sup>143</sup>

### **A Limited SCO**

When meeting with Karzai in late March 2010 in Beijing, former Premier Wen Jiabao pledged additional PRC diplomatic efforts to support peace in Afghanistan: “China will step up contact and coordination with Afghanistan and the international society to strive for a secure and harmonious regional environment, push for lasting peace and common development.”<sup>144</sup> The PRC has sought to advance its agenda regarding Afghanistan directly through senior-level bilateral meetings, but also by working with other countries (especially Pakistan but also India and Russia) and multinational institutions (particularly the United Nations and the SCO).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has established a Regional Anti-Terrorism Center in which the member governments share information about possible terrorist threats. The SCO also organizes periodic exercises involving paramilitary and law enforcement agencies to rehearse counterterrorism operations. In addition to using the SCO to counter potential terrorist threats against the PRC, Chinese policymakers have supported initiatives to expand the organization’s role in Afghanistan.<sup>145</sup> In explaining why a senior Chinese delegation attended the special March 2009 SCO conference on Afghanistan in Moscow, the Foreign Ministry stated:

---

<sup>140</sup> Chris Buckley, “U.S. looks to China for support on Afghanistan: Pentagon,” Reuters Canada, February 28, 2009, <http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCATRE51R0L720090228>.

<sup>141</sup> Cheng Guangjin and Cai Xiao, “NATO seeks Chinese rebuilding help for Kabul,” *China Daily*, March 25, 2010, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-03/25/content\\_9637954.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-03/25/content_9637954.htm).

<sup>142</sup> Tini Tran, “As U.S. fights, China spends to gain Afghan foothold,” Associated Press, July 3, 2010, [http://www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2010/07/03/as\\_us\\_fights\\_china\\_spends\\_to\\_gain\\_afghan\\_foothold](http://www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2010/07/03/as_us_fights_china_spends_to_gain_afghan_foothold)

<sup>143</sup> Sebastian Moffett and Justyna Pawlak, “NATO head calls on China, Russia to help fund Afghan forces,” Reuters, April 19, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/19/us-nato-russia-idUSBRE83I1A820120419>.

<sup>144</sup> “China, Afghanistan plan closer partnership as Karzai concludes state visit,” Xinhua, March 25, 2010, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-03/25/c\\_13224814.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-03/25/c_13224814.htm).

<sup>145</sup> “Chinese Foreign Minister: To Promote SCO to Achieve Substantial Improvements and Breakthroughs,” China News, July 31, 2014, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2014/07-31/6447586.shtml>.

At present, the Afghanistan issue has drawn extensive attention from the international community. The SCO members and observers are all countries of impact in the region. China supports Afghanistan's effort in safeguarding independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as realizing security, stability and economic reconstruction. China is open to any proposal and measure that serves this end. It is for this reason that China will attend both conferences. We hope that Afghanistan could achieve enduring peace, stability and development with the concerted efforts of the international community, including the SCO members and observers. China will continue to play its due role.<sup>146</sup>

At the conference, PRC Deputy Foreign Minister Wu Dawei announced that China would give \$75 million worth of economic and military assistance to Afghanistan during the next five years. Although the total was large compared to the aid distributions of other SCO members, the amount was modest compared to the donations of the NATO countries whose soldiers were also bearing the heaviest military burden.<sup>147</sup> Karzai has been a regular attendee of recent SCO summits, and the organization has established a SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group in recognition of the country's importance for realizing its members' regional security and economic goals.

At the June 2012 SCO summit in Beijing, which Karzai attended, the organization granted Afghanistan formal SCO observer status. In his speech at the summit, President Hu outlined an SCO approach to Afghanistan: "We will continue to follow the concept that regional affairs should be managed by countries in the region...that we should guard against shocks from turbulence outside the region, and should play a bigger role in Afghanistan's peaceful reconstruction."<sup>148</sup> Chinese officials were hopeful that making Afghanistan an observer would "speed up security and economic cooperation" between Afghanistan and the SCO.<sup>149</sup> Karzai stated at the conference that "Afghanistan welcomes China to play a stronger role in regional affairs."<sup>150</sup>

One obstacle China has faced in employing the SCO as a mechanism for engaging Afghanistan is a lack of ties between NATO and the organization. Although mutual suspicions have declined since the July 2005 SCO leadership summit in Astana issued a statement asking the United States and its allies to set a timetable for ending their military presence in the region, neither NATO as an institution nor many of its alliance members have interacted with the organization on a regular basis. Afghanistan might provide a catalyst for such engagement in the future, but NATO still prefers to interact with the Central Asian governments directly rather than through another institution such as the SCO or the Moscow-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—which also does not include China.

---

<sup>146</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference on March 26, 2009," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Botswana, March 26, 2009, <http://bw.chineseembassy.org/eng/fyrth/t554360.htm>.

<sup>147</sup> "China Pledges \$75m in aid for Afghanistan," *China Daily*, April 1, 2009, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-04/01/content\\_7638635.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-04/01/content_7638635.htm).

<sup>148</sup> "Central Asia bloc gives Afghans observer status," CNS News, June 7, 2012, <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/central-asia-bloc-gives-afghans-observer-status>.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> "Chinese state councilor, Afghan president meet," Xinhua, June 8, 2012, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-06/08/c\\_131640647.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-06/08/c_131640647.htm).

More fundamentally, the SCO lacks the capacity to protect Chinese interests in Afghanistan. Some other members of the organization, while sharing China's goals for stability in Afghanistan, favor a different operational and tactical approach. Unlike NATO, the SCO has no collective military forces. Although China might seek to cobble together a regional response following NATO's withdrawal, the SCO lacks the capacity and unity to undertake a successful effort, especially as Beijing is unwilling to spearhead a military intervention under multinational auspices. PRC diplomats can hardly hope that Russia, despite its growing ties with Afghanistan, will authorize the return of combat troops to that country, whose people still harbor negative memories of the Soviet military occupation. The four other full SCO members—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—lack the power projection capacity to tackle the Taliban in Afghanistan. Russia and China differ in some of their Afghan policies, while Uzbekistan advocates creating a new “6+3” negotiating platform that would involve NATO and the UN but not the Afghan government. Iran, India and Pakistan are all aspiring SCO members, but their common goal of entering the organization has not dampened competition among them in Afghanistan.

### **New Bilateral, Trilateral and Multilateral Channels**

Despite shared interests in containing Afghan instability and limiting the Western military presence, and their *de facto* joint leadership of the SCO, Chinese-Russia cooperation regarding Afghanistan has been surprisingly limited. Their approaches to the Afghan issue diverge in important areas. Whereas China has kept its presence in Afghanistan modest and sought to avoid siding too visibly with NATO and the Karzai government, Russia has assisted the NATO-led ISAF campaign and has recently increased its economic and security ties with the Afghan government. While China has sought to limit the SCO's security involvement in Afghanistan, Russia has been encouraging the CSTO, which excludes China, to develop military options for regional security contingencies. Independent of its CSTO-related initiatives, the Russian military has been enhancing its bilateral security ties with Central Asian countries like Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, which host Russian military bases. Russia's influence in Kabul has grown much greater than that of China. For example, Karzai's government was one of the few to support Moscow's annexation of Crimea. Russia and India have expanded military cooperation regarding Afghanistan, despite Beijing's unease at this partnership. In an important step, India has agreed to pay Russia to give weapons to the ANA. Many Chinese still consider India a strategic competitor; even those Chinese officials who do not want Afghanistan to become a battlefield between India and Pakistan would still want Pakistan to win any battle that might occur.

Whatever their concerns about the presence of Uyghur terrorists and affiliated groups in Pakistan, Chinese officials rely on Pakistani connections to press the Taliban to respect PRC interests.<sup>151</sup> They have called on Islamabad to play an active role in the Afghan peace process, seeing Pakistan as an important conduit to influence developments in Afghanistan.<sup>152</sup> In 2013, China and Pakistan established a bilateral consultation mechanism on regional security that covers Afghanistan. Pakistani leaders certainly seemed disposed to align themselves with China as much as Beijing

---

<sup>151</sup> “Analysts Say Pakistan is Beijing's Window on Afghanistan,” Voice of America, July 7, 2010, <http://www.voanews.com/content/analysts-say-pakistan-is-beijings-window-on-afghanistan--98045824/165985.html>.

<sup>152</sup> Saibal Dasgupta, “China urges world powers to back Pak during crisis,” *The Times of India*, December 25, 2011, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/China-urges-world-powers-to-back-Pak-during-crisis/articleshow/11238397.cms>.

would permit. They have effusively praised China's support for Pakistani efforts to safeguard their country's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. Pakistani officials regularly affirm the complete convergence of the two governments' positions on foreign economic and security issues..<sup>153</sup> But Pakistani officials try to maintain good relations with both Beijing and Washington, hoping to derive leverage from their ties with each while avoiding becoming overly dependent on a single great power that, as in the past, could abandon them to pursue a potentially more profitable relationship with India. PRC officials would also clearly prefer that Western governments continue to bear the bulk of the financial costs of sustaining Pakistan's economy and the diplomatic burden of trying to limit Pakistani support for regional terrorism.

Afghan officials and their foreign allies have sought to use China's strong ties with Pakistan as a source of influence. They have asked China to pressure Pakistani security services to reduce their assistance to the Afghan Taliban and persuade its leaders to enter into peace negotiations with the Karzai government.<sup>154</sup> For example, Karzai has indicated at various instances that China, due to its good relations with both Afghanistan and Pakistan, is in a special position to promote the peace process by fostering counterterrorism cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>155</sup> Members of Afghanistan's political circles believe that China will try to persuade Pakistan to work toward long term peace in Afghanistan, as instability in Afghanistan could have knock-on effects in Xinjiang.<sup>156</sup> At Kabul's initiative, an Afghanistan-Pakistan-China Trilateral Dialogue began in February 2012. At their first session in Beijing, the parties endorsed an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" reconciliation process, supported the UN's leading role in the regional security and stability, and called on other international organizations and mechanisms like SCO to play more important roles. The PRC delegation "expressed [its] readiness to play a constructive role" in assisting Afghanistan and Pakistan to develop bilateral ties, including cooperation on economic and security matters. However, no exact, practical plans were formulated for implementing these declarations.<sup>157</sup> The parties endorsed similar goals at their second meeting in November of that year.<sup>158</sup> China has since warmed to this triangular construct, and has supported other trilateral meetings with different sets of players, though thus far these have resulted in little action.

China's latest multilateral diplomatic forays have involved hosting sessions of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building in Asia (CICA) and the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, both dealing with Afghanistan. After showing little interest in CICA for years, China's interest increased when Beijing assumed chairmanship of the institution, which includes Afghanistan as one of its two dozen members, in May 2014. At the CICA summit in Beijing held that month,

---

<sup>153</sup> "Pak-China partnership conducive to stability of Asia: Gilani," *Dawn*, December 23, 2011, <http://www.dawn.com/news/682670/pak-china-partnership-conducive-to-stability-of-asia-gilani>.

<sup>154</sup> "Relations between China and Afghanistan," Reuters, March 22, 2010, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2010/03/22/idINIndia-47116320100322>; and Anthony Kuhn, "China Becomes A Player In Afghanistan's Future," NPR, October 21, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113967842>.

<sup>155</sup> Damian Grammaticas, "China- and Russia-led Shanghai bloc eyes Afghan role," BBC, June 7, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-18349607>.

<sup>156</sup> Tahir Khan, "China's interest in Afghanistan could bode well for both countries," *The Express Tribune*, July 26, 2014, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/740970/chinas-interest-in-afghanistan-could-bode-well-for-both-countries>.

<sup>157</sup> "The first Afghanistan-China-Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue at General-Director Level held in Beijing," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, February 28, 2012, <http://www.mfa.gov.af/en/news/7481>.

<sup>158</sup> "Joint Press Statement Second Meeting of Pakistan-Afghanistan-China Trilateral Dialogue," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, November 29, 2012, <http://www.mfa.gov.af/en/news/15135>.

President Xi proposed a new Asian security concept in which Asian countries would achieve “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security” based on “peace, development and win-win cooperation” in which differences and disputes between states were resolved through dialogue and negotiations. He announced plans to strengthen the CICA as an institution by enhancing its secretariat, establishing a supporting non-governmental exchange network, and creating a “defense consultation mechanism” and a “security response center” for major emergencies.<sup>159</sup> The summit declaration said that CICA members would “remain committed to support Afghanistan and work with the rest of the international community to contribute to Afghanistan’s and the region’s security, stability, economic growth and development.”<sup>160</sup> PRC priorities were clearly reflected in a subsequent clause:

“We recognize that terrorism, violent extremism and illicit drugs pose great threat for security and stability of Afghanistan, region and beyond. While appreciating the Afghan national efforts and the joint and concerted regional and international cooperation to address the challenge of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, including dismantling of terrorist sanctuaries and safe havens, as well as disrupting all financial and tactical support for terrorism, we emphasize the need for continuing these efforts further. It is necessary that the international community assists Afghanistan in countering illicit drug production and trafficking and promoting alternative livelihood; and take other necessary measures in countering illicit drugs, precursors and consumption worldwide<sup>161</sup>.

The declaration also insisted that “the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan should be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led.”<sup>162</sup>

The CICA declaration explicitly expressed “support [for] China in hosting the Fourth Foreign Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process on Deepening Cooperation for Sustainable Security and Prosperity of the Heart of Asia Region in Tianjin in August 2014.”<sup>163</sup> The “Istanbul Process” is a Eurasian-focused effort to bring peace and prosperity to Afghanistan and its neighbors by promoting an Afghan-led peace and reconciliation process supported by a favorable regional economic and security environment, with a focus on further integrating Afghanistan economically through the development of improved transportation links. The process consists of a series of high-level meetings in Istanbul to promote regional cooperation in the “Heart of Asia” region, especially between Afghanistan and its neighbors. The process includes Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the UAE and Uzbekistan. It is supported by many other countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Denmark, Canada, Australia, Italy, Norway, Egypt and Iraq, as well as influential international organizations. Earlier

<sup>159</sup> Xi Jinping, “New Asian Security Concept For New Progress in Security Cooperation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, May 21, 2014, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1159951.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1159951.shtml).

<sup>160</sup> “Declaration of the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia On Enhancing Dialogue, Trust and Coordination for a New Asia of Peace, Stability and Cooperation,” May 21, 2014, <http://www.sesrtic.org/imgs/news/Image/1031-CICADeclaration.pdf>.

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Nurbek Almashov, “CICA Summit in Shanghai Focuses on New Goals for Security Forum,” *The Astana Times*, May 22, 2014, <http://astanatimes.com/2014/05/cica-summit-shanghai-focuses-new-goals-security-forum/>.

ministerial meetings occurred in Istanbul (November 2, 2011), Kabul (June 14, 2012) and Almaty (April 26, 2013). The fourth conference, scheduled for August 29, was postponed until later that year because of the Afghan presidential election stalemate.<sup>164</sup> The disputed summer 2014 presidential election paralyzed Afghanistan's political and security development. Like Afghanistan's other foreign partners, Chinese officials have been preoccupied with what Foreign Minister Wang Yi called Afghanistan's "triple transitions" this year, which include conducting a presidential election, transforming the foreign military presence and weaning Afghanistan off of foreign assistance.<sup>165</sup> Though both of the top two candidates favored extending the Western military presence and other policies supported by Beijing, the bitter post-ballot feud between Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani initially prevented this from occurring, risking a complete Western military disengagement from Afghanistan by the end of this year. In addition to expressing interest in seeing "Afghanistan run by the Afghans," PRC officials called on the two men to resolve their differences peacefully and to complete the elections and presidential transition on schedule.<sup>166</sup> Special Envoy Sun, while reaffirming Beijing's overall support, called on the presidential candidates to continue to improve Chinese-Afghan relations.<sup>167</sup> PRC officials welcomed U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts to resolve the crisis through a post-electoral agreement between Abdullah and Ghani. They expressed hope for a "unified, stable, developed and amicable Afghanistan" that, with Beijing's support, would achieve "lasting peace and sustainable development."<sup>168</sup> It took months for the two men to reach an uneasy power-sharing deal. Meanwhile, Chinese and U.S. officials have continued a formal dialogue over Afghanistan, though without any concrete policy results so far.<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>164</sup> Ghanizada and Hazrat Bahar, "Afghan Elections Dilemma: Finish before it finishes you," Khaama Press, August 31, 2014, <http://www.khaama.com/afghan-elections-dilemma-finish-before-it-finishes-you-6615>.

<sup>165</sup> "China to hold int'l conference on Afghanistan issue," Xinhua, March 8, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2014-03/08/c\\_133170656.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2014-03/08/c_133170656.htm).

<sup>166</sup> "China hopes for smooth end to Afghan election," Xinhua, July 8, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-07/08/c\\_133469386.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-07/08/c_133469386.htm).

<sup>167</sup> "China to give more support for Afghanistan's development: Envoy," Xinhua, July 26, 2014, [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2014-07/26/content\\_33063758.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2014-07/26/content_33063758.htm).

<sup>168</sup> Hong Lei, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Remarks on Afghan Presidential Election and Other Issues," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, July 15, 2014, <http://af.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1174609.htm>.

<sup>169</sup> William Dalrymple, "Afghanistan: As China forges new alliances, a new Great Game has begun," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/18/afghanistan-china-new-great-game-united-states>.



## Concluding Observations

Although China's foreign policy has become much more assertive in many other areas, Beijing's approach toward Afghanistan has thus far adhered to Deng Xiaoping's adage that, in its foreign policies, China should "Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership."<sup>170</sup> While Western policymakers have focused on winning the ground war in Afghanistan, the PRC has patiently established a leading presence in important Afghan economic sectors. Having kept out of the vicious fighting between NATO and Taliban forces, as well as the widely publicized disputes between Karzai and Western governments, Beijing has enhanced its ability to deal with whatever actors gain power in Afghanistan—the Karzai government, regional warlords, the Taliban or some combination of these players.

In the near term, China's most significant interests in Afghanistan are primarily related to security. Above all, Beijing is concerned that adverse developments in Afghanistan could promote instability in Central Asia, Pakistan and China itself, especially its western province of Xinjiang. PRC analysts share gloomy international assessments regarding Afghanistan's near-term future, with major political, economic and diplomatic challenges. The growing insurgency has prevented China from realizing its economic aspirations for Afghanistan and has stoked Chinese fears that a renewed Taliban will support subversion and terrorism in Afghanistan's neighbors. There are also lingering concerns about the regional intentions of the United States—although the Western military presence in Eurasia is declining, Sino-American security ties remain troubled. PRC officials neither want the Pentagon to keep a military presence in China's strategic rear, nor to precipitously withdraw its forces from the region.

Looking ahead, China's preferred outcome is a negotiated peace settlement among the Afghan government, the Afghan Taliban and other Afghan combatants, supported by Afghanistan's neighboring countries and the great powers. Beijing would ideally like to see these international partners agree to preserve Afghanistan's neutrality and collectively contributing to the country's political development and economic reconstruction. This scenario would establish a more favorable environment for PRC investment in Afghanistan, reduce some sources of regional terrorism and narcotics trafficking, and facilitate the use of Afghanistan's territory as part of the Afghan-Pakistan-Central Asian "Silk Road" connecting China's trade and investment with the rest of Eurasia and Europe beyond.

The prospects of the PLA sending troops into Afghanistan are negligible, but China could make significant indirect contributions to Afghan security. While NATO will continue to take the lead in training the Afghan Army, Chinese institutions could train more Afghan police officers, border patrols and other non-ANA security personnel. Given Beijing's concern with Afghan-origin narcotics, China might also join other countries in helping to train and equip Afghan counter-narcotics personnel. Though Beijing will continue to distance itself from NATO's activities in Afghanistan, more Sino-Western cooperation within the UN, the World Bank and other large-

---

<sup>170</sup> M.K. Bhadrakumar, "China breaks its silence on Afghanistan," *Asia Times Online*, February 25, 2009, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KB25Ad03.html>.

member multinational institutions in these areas is possible since readily available institutional mechanisms already exist.

Cooperation within regional institutions is possible, and to some extent unavoidable, but is harder as these smaller-member institutions tend to lack strong ties with one or the other of China and NATO. The United States and its European allies could contribute to certain functional projects backed by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, but they might need some kind of formal affiliation with the SCO, perhaps through a new SCO+3 dialogue group or some other status. But working with the SCO, run largely as a Sino-Russian condominium, will prove difficult when Russia-Western relations are so strained. If China succeeds in strengthening CICA and the organization assumes a greater role in Afghanistan, the West will need a more developed policy toward that institution—which excludes the United States, Japan and other Western countries—as well. China still views NATO warily (a result of Cold War antagonisms and the 1999 Belgrade Embassy bombing), but the alliance could invite Chinese experts to participate in NATO events and non-military projects related to Afghanistan without (yet) trying to create the kind of formal body with China that the alliance has established with Russia, Ukraine and other countries that have a more developed relationship with the alliance.

In seeking additional Chinese economic assistance for Afghanistan (and Pakistan), the United States and its allies should strive to induce China to make its aid flows more transparent, which would help avoid duplication. They should also encourage Beijing to demand that recipients of Chinese economic aid practice good domestic governance (e.g., civilian control of the military and intelligence services as well as respect for human rights); responsible economic policies (limited state control and domestic subsidies); opposition to WMD proliferation and terrorism; and conforming to the other requirements typically imposed by international lending agencies (such as transparency and curbs on corruption). Chinese and Western interest in developing new Asian-focused financial institutions might provide mechanisms to encourage greater Chinese adherence to these lending policies.

We should bear in mind that precedents set in dealing with Afghanistan could heavily influence how Beijing responds to similar security issues elsewhere. In particular, China will likely eschew policies that fail in Afghanistan while pursuing those that prove successful.<sup>171</sup> In this regard, Western governments should carefully weigh the risks and potential benefits of encouraging Chinese paramilitary forces, such as the People's Armed Police or China's new private security firms, to establish a presence in Afghanistan (or elsewhere). These forces could enhance Afghanistan's security, but it is precisely such informal combatants that Russia has deployed in Ukraine, and it would be desirable if Beijing not develop the capabilities to pursue the same hybrid warfare techniques in Eurasia. Differing Western and PRC definitions of terrorism—the United States and its allies rightly reject the Chinese concept of “the three evil forces,” which equates religious extremism and separatism with terrorism even if pursued with non-violent means—will invariably lead to continued Chinese charges of hypocrisy and double dealing. The West should also be wary of encouraging China to cooperate with Russia, within the SCO or directly, on Afghan

---

<sup>171</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Daniel Trombly, and Nathaniel Barr, “China's Post-2014 Role in Afghanistan,” Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Washington, DC, October 2014, [http://defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/publications/China\\_Report.pdf](http://defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/publications/China_Report.pdf).

and Central Asian issues, since a condominium between these two authoritarian regimes would challenge a range of Western interests and values.

In developing their future Afghan policies, U.S. policymakers should follow some general rules of thumb:

- China's policy toward Afghanistan cannot be considered in isolation and must be understood within a domestic, regional and global context. For example, China and the United States might cooperate better on Afghan projects in multilateral institutions, especially on economic issues, rather than bilaterally on security issues. In addition, the two governments could find it easier to cooperate on Pakistan or overlapping Af-Pak issues rather than on Afghanistan alone, since their shared security stakes are potentially greater regarding Pakistan.
- Nonetheless, several factors will make Sino-American cooperation regarding Afghanistan especially difficult in the next few years. The overall bilateral relationship is likely to remain fraught due to their different ideologies, alignments and disputes over concrete issues. Many PRC analysts see current U.S. national security policy as weak, and believe that the United States is failing to provide the kinds of international public goods that benefit China. In the case of Afghanistan, Beijing thinks that Washington is trying to trap China into pulling U.S. chestnuts out of the fire and, conversely, that China does not need to heed Washington's views due to declining U.S. capacity and interest regarding Afghanistan.
- It is imperative to avoid mirror imaging. Chinese and U.S. views and interests regarding Afghanistan will continue to differ in important respects. Even so, some of the two governments' assessments regarding Afghanistan are aligning more closely, possibly making it easier to cooperate. For example, Chinese analysts have traditionally held less alarmist threat assessments regarding Afghanistan than the United States and other countries, but U.S. concerns and commitments are declining, while Chinese unease about Afghanistan is rising, due to the growth of regional terrorism and the Western military drawdown.
- In their diplomatic exchanges, U.S. policymakers can target mixed Chinese feelings about the NATO military drawdown in Afghanistan, emphasizing either its positive or negative dimensions depending on the actors and circumstances involved. For example, highlighting economic opportunities might encourage further Chinese investment, while focusing on security nightmares might promote counterterrorism cooperation.
- Fortunately, Beijing and Washington do not need identical interests or views to cooperate directly. They can indirectly collaborate in complementary ways on overlapping or non-conflictual interests. Policymakers in both countries must think creatively to find opportunities to advance the interests of Afghanistan and other partners as well as those of their own country.
- For example, the United States and China have different approaches toward economic development, but they can pursue complementary policies. China is best positioned to support large public infrastructure projects, whereas the United States can more effectively

promote free-market institutions and the rule of law. Similarly, China and the West can conduct complementary counter-narcotics efforts by independently training and equipping Afghan narcotics officers and by focusing their interdiction efforts on different borders, with China perhaps helping to fortify Afghanistan's border with Iran. Although this frontier experiences massive drug flows, the United States still cannot easily provide security assistance to the Iranian government, whereas China has established the same pragmatic ties with Tehran as it has with the other regional players in Afghanistan.

## About the Author

Richard Weitz is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Political-Military Analysis at Hudson Institute. His current research covers regional security developments relating to Europe, Eurasia and East Asia, as well as U.S. foreign and defense policies. Dr. Weitz is also an Expert at Wikistrat and a non-resident Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security. Before joining Hudson in 2003, Dr. Weitz worked for the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Defense Science Board, DFI International, Inc., Center for Strategic Studies, Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and the U.S. Department of Defense. Dr. Weitz is a graduate of Harvard University (Ph.D. in Political Science), Oxford University (M.Phil. in Politics), the London School of Economics (M.Sc. in International Relations) and Harvard College (B.A. with Highest Honors in Government), where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He is proficient in Russian, French and German. Dr. Weitz has authored or edited several books and monographs, including *Rebuilding American Military Power in the Pacific: A 21st-Century Strategy* (2013); *Global Security Watch-China* (2013); two volumes of *National Security Case Studies* (2012 and 2008); *War and Governance: International Security in a Changing World Order* (2011); *The Russian Military Today and Tomorrow* (2010); *Global Security Watch-Russia* (2009); *China-Russia Security Relations* (2008); *Kazakhstan and the New International Politics of Eurasia* (2008); *Mismanaging Mayhem: How Washington Responds to Crisis* (2008); *The Reserve Policies of Nations: A Comparative Analysis* (2007); and *Revitalizing U.S.-Russian Security Cooperation: Practical Measures* (2005). Dr. Weitz has also published in such journals as *Survival*, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, *The Washington Quarterly*, *The National Interest*, *NATO Review*, *Global Asia*, *Arms Control Today*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, *Defense Concepts*, *Pacific Focus*, *Journal of Defence Studies*, *Small Wars Journal*, *WMD Insights*, *Parameters: U.S. Army War College Quarterly*, *Naval War College Review*, *World Affairs*, *Political Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Strategic Studies* and *Yale Journal of International Affairs*.

