



Strengthening Sino-Afghan Relations: Cause for Concern?

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August-September 2012

On 23 September 2012, several years of progressively strengthening Sino-Afghan relations were cemented when President Hamid Karzai received a visit from Zhou Yongkang, China's Domestic Security Chief and a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party.¹ While the visit was unannounced publically, it signified the first visit from a Chinese official in nearly half a century, prompting President Karzai and Youngkang to use the historic visit as an opportunity to sign several economic and security deals. While not all of the details surrounding the agreements have been widely circulated in the week afterward, it is known that the agreements included a Chinese commitment to host and train at least 300 Afghan police officers in China over the next four years.² These agreements come on the heels of a 4-year period wherein Sino-Afghan relations have progressively warmed to include several high profile business ventures as well as the announcement of a strategic partnership at the Shanghai Co-operation Organization in June 2012.

The 23 September agreements were only one in a series of bi-lateral arrangements, yet they have sparked renewed speculation in intellectual circles as to whether Chinese influence in Afghanistan is cause for concern, particularly with the 2014 military transition fast approaching. Reports on Chinese investment in Afghanistan generally stop just short of accusing the former of trying to monopolize Afghan oil and mineral reserves for their own profit and energy consumption; however, they have hinted that the Afghan government may want to exercise some caution in their budding relationship with China.³ It seems that, some fear Chinese exploitation of Afghan resources as well as China's potential ability to politically strong-arm Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan and Iran. In reality, however, China has shown no such inclination; rather, it seems that Chinese aspirations in Afghanistan remain limited to specific areas of mutual benefit.

Background

At approximately 85 km, the border between Badakhshan, Afghanistan's most north-eastern province, and Xinjiang province in China is quite small. Still, the passage through the Wakan has been historically significant as an early trade route linking China to Central Asia. While no longer a key access point for goods, Afghanistan has remained an area of great concern for China throughout the turbulence that has characterized the late 20th Century to the present.⁴ From its inception in 1949, the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) maintained regular, albeit fairly periphery relations with Afghanistan.⁵ The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent Moscow-backed government threatened the regional balance of power and soured the relationship between Beijing and Kabul.⁶ In fact, the Chinese were among the various supporters of the anti-Soviet

¹ "China and Afghanistan Sign Economic and Security Deals," BBC News, 23 September 2012.

² Ibid.

³ Tom A. Peter, "China Wins \$700 Million Afghan Oil and Gas Deal. Why Didn't the US Bid?" The Christian Science Monitor, 28 December 2011.

⁴ Richard Weitz, "The Limits of Partnership: China, NATO and the Afghan War," China Security, Vol. 6. No. 1 2010, pp. 22.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Zhao Huasheng, "China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives," Center for Strategic & International Studies, March 2012.

insurgency, “providing weapons and training in collaboration with the United States and Pakistan, where most of the guerrillas were based.”⁷ With the exception of a short time in 1992-93, civil unrest and the extremist Taliban government that followed from 1996-2001 effectually froze bi-lateral diplomacy between the two states.⁸

The PRC re-opened its Kabul embassy in 2002, and has “maintained a close and friendly relationship with Afghanistan since.”⁹ In the last decade, China and Afghanistan have signed numerous documents and solidified significant business ventures, including the 2006 Treaty of Good Neighbourly Friendship and Cooperation, a USD \$3 billion Aynak copper mining venture in Logar Province in 2008, oil and gas exploration rights valued at USD \$700 million in December 2011, a strategic partnership and a strategic partnership in June 2012 following the SCO meeting, all in addition to various direct infrastructure and telecommunications investments.¹⁰ At this stage, it is clear that China is both economically and politically invested in Afghanistan.

The Motivational Underpinnings of China’s Relationship with Afghanistan

So what, then, drives China in its dealings with Afghanistan? Broadly, there appear to be four major points of common interest that shape Chinese activity with regard to Afghanistan. First, national and regional security concerns, particularly with respect to the ethnic Uighur separatists in Xinjiang province are of primary importance to the PRC. Secondly, China and Afghanistan have a shared interest in developing the Afghan energy and mining markets. Third, Beijing appears to have a sense of political realism wherein it refuses to alienate the Taliban out of recognition of the stark possibility that elements of current insurgency may become key or even the primary governing forces in the post-2014 scenario. Finally, China’s relatively *laissez faire* approach to aid and development in Afghanistan is probably designed to a certain extent as an alternative to western – particularly US – tendencies to use aid and development projects to influence the Afghan political landscape.

Domestic security concerns in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is clearly a top-level priority of the PRC. Unlike the rest of China, the Uighurs of Xinjiang are Muslim and ethnically Turkish.¹¹ Historically, there has been tension between the Uighurs and Chinese governments that date back nearly a millennia; however, a separatist movement has been particularly fierce since 1990. Since then, there have been “scores of separatists uprisings, protests, and killing of Han Chinese Officials.”¹² Unsurprisingly, therefore, Beijing considers Uighur separatists terrorists who undermine national security.¹³

⁷ Weitz, 22.

⁸ Huasheng, 2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Peter, 1.; Jane Perlez, “China Shows Interest in Afghan Security, Fearing Taliban Would Help Separatists,” *The New York Times*, 8 June 2012.

¹¹ “Controlling Xinjiang: Autonomy on China’s ‘New Frontier’” *3 Asian-Pacific Law & Policy Journal*, Vol. 3 Issue 1 (Winter 2002), pp. 121.

¹² *Controlling Xinjiang*, pp. 122.

¹³ “Let Them Shoot Hoops: China’s Turbulent West is Unlikely to be Calmed by Plans for Economic Development,” *The Economist*, 03 July 2012.

It is widely known that many of the militants from Xinjiang have received at least training in Afghanistan by other insurgent and jihadi militants based in the latter or in Pakistan. Thus, China has a vested security interest in Afghanistan, particularly in the northeast, because civil unrest provides a breeding ground for militant Islamic extremism that can and does bleed over into China.¹⁴

Secondly, Afghanistan provides the PRC with a key opportunity to enhance its access to mineral and energy sources that are critical to China's continued economic and industrial growth. In 2010, the Pentagon estimated that untapped mineral deposits in Afghanistan may be worth up to USD \$1 trillion.¹⁵ For a country like Afghanistan where the vast majority of the GDP is dependent on foreign aid, mining and oil reserves present a crucial opportunity to develop an independent Afghan economy. However, the Kabul government lacks sufficient start-up capital to take advantage of mining. China, on the other hand, needs secure access to energy sources to maintain the pace of its rapid industrialization, and also appears to recognize economic development as a pathway to stability. In return for access to the deposits, China has paid handsomely, but also ensured that Afghanistan enjoys very favourable terms of the contracts. Aside from the majority of petrol profits, land fees and tax revenue, the PRC has promised Afghanistan that it will invest heavily in industrial infrastructure including railways, power plants and at least one oil refinery.¹⁶ If built, such infrastructure may serve as an initial jumpstart to an Afghan economy that does not depend quite as heavily on foreign aid.

Thirdly, Beijing has played a noticeably limited role in the US and NATO-led military campaign in the last decade. While, as noted above, Afghan stability is clearly in line with PRC interests, the latter has repeatedly shirked requests from the international community to send a direct military presence, choosing instead to operate bi-laterally and form co-operation agreements directly with the Afghan government. While mounting Sino-US rivalry undoubtedly has some relevance here, the PRC's aversion to military involvement is more indicative of geopolitical pragmatism. Unlike the Coalition members, China cannot "go back home" at the end of the war; sharing a border means that the PRC must find itself able and willing to operate diplomatically with whatever manifestation of governance emerges victorious after 2014. While Taliban re-emergence is not ideal for China, it must nonetheless tread lightly around the possibility. As it stands now, "China is unconvinced that the Taliban can be defeated by military means."¹⁷

If China were to pursue military action against Taliban insurgents, two direct consequences become likely. First, the PRC would become inevitably linked to NATO and US troops the Taliban labels "foreign occupiers." Consequently, such an alliance would probably elicit direct retaliation against Chinese industrial installations or even on Chinese soil, given the proximity. Second, a war waged against Islamic groups in Afghanistan would probably provide a rallying point around which the Separatists in Xinjiang could further mobilize. Ultimately, it is a much safer bet for the PRC to sit back, let the United States and NATO take responsibility for the armed conflict, offer bi-lateral

¹⁴ Huasheng, 3.

¹⁵ James Risen, "U.S. Identifies Vast Mineral Riches in Afghanistan," New York Times, 13 June 2010.

¹⁶ Huasheng, 6.; Weitz, 25.

¹⁷ Huasheng, 8.

training and intelligence sharing to the Afghan government, continue investment and wait to see which side emerges as the political winner.

Finally, Sino-Afghan diplomacy is probably driven to some extent by the PRC's desire to counter-balance the US foothold in the country. Over the last decade, tension has mounted between the United States and China, both of whom appear suspicious of the other's strategic motives. While US-Sino relations have made some small strides in recent years, it is also clear that the United States has renewed diplomatic focus on Southeast Asia, primarily to counter Chinese dominance.¹⁸ Still, a prolonged US presence in Afghanistan has given the US interests significant political weight in Afghanistan that will likely continue, albeit in a more limited scope, beyond 2014. This is obviously counter to the interests of the PRC and the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, who have publically declared a desire to help Afghanistan "safeguard[] sovereignty and territorial integrity, promoting peace and development"¹⁹

Sino-Afghan Relations, Cause for Concern?

China has gradually built a close alliance with Afghan Leadership over the last decade. However, as outlined above, Chinese interests in Afghanistan have been fairly limited in scope and primarily taken the form of economic investment and diplomatic agreements. So, why then, are western observers alarmed by the burgeoning friendship? And to what extent are such fears founded?

Generally, it seems that most concern regarding the tightening bond between Kabul and Beijing revolves around Beijing's own alignment with Pakistan and Iran in cool opposition to the US and India. Clearly, US-Iranian relations are at an all-time low with the former very critical of Iran's unwavering support of the Syrian Assad regime that has been waging a brutal war against its own civilians for over a year.²⁰ Simultaneously, Israel and the US have voiced extreme, on-going disapproval over what is thought to be Iran's race to a nuclear weapon, with the former even threatening military action in the near future.²¹ While China has signed various nuclear non-proliferation treaties, it clearly does not believe that a nuclear Iran is as threatening as western powers claim.²² Ultimately, China has refused to intervene in either case and has used its position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council to block legal, co-ordinated action by UN member nations under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

Similarly, some international political analysts are unnerved by the partnership between China and Pakistan, its neighbour and closest ally. Coalition Forces have been increasingly critical of the Pakistani government for its role in destabilizing the region by supporting terrorist networks such as the Haqqani cross the border and carry out attacks

¹⁸ Scott Stearns, "Clinton in Pacific Advancing US Pivot to Asia," Voice of America, 1 September 2012.; Yogesh Joshi, "With East Asian Missile Defense, U.S. Sends Clear Message to China," World Politics Review, 26 September 2012.

¹⁹ Shanghai Cooperation Organization, "China Vows to Support Building a Terror-free Afghanistan," Official Communication, 6 June 2012. Available at http://www.scosummit2012.org/english/2012-06/06/c_131635648.htm.

²⁰ "Syrian Arm, Rebels Fight for Control of Aleppo; Marketplace Burns," CNN, 30 September 2012.

²¹ Natasha Mozgovaya, "Netanyahu: Israel, U.S. Coordinated 'On Highest Levels' on Iran Nuclear Program," Haaretz, 29 September 2012.

²² Jeffrey Reeves, "Chinese Perspectives on Sino-Iran Relations" Small Wars Journal, 9 September 2011, pp. 11.

in Afghanistan.²³ At the same time, Pakistani interests in Afghanistan are significantly influenced by its own longstanding competition with India, the US' strongest ally in the region.²⁴ While the partnership between the Afghan and Pakistani governments has been challenged since the recognition of ISI-sponsored militant opposition groups, a mutual friend in China could push Afghanistan toward Pakistan, although no substantial gains have appeared to confirm such a hypothesis.²⁵

Given China's patchwork of alliances with western foes, it is easy to see how Afghanistan has the potential to end up in the middle of any number of international conflicts. In the event any of the above-mentioned tensions erupt, Afghanistan's geographic location alone will make it a strategic ally for any side fortunate enough to sufficiently court the Kabul government. However, such assessments are overly alarmist and do not account for the reality of Chinese diplomacy. In all cases – including Afghanistan – Chinese relationships with their regional allies are fairly limited, confined to specific points that further PRC interests. Similar to Afghanistan, China primarily pursues mutually beneficial economic interests with Iran and Pakistan. Indeed, most of the PRC's refusal to join multi-lateral efforts to engage Pakistan and Iran stem from a political philosophy wherein China refuses to “manage” their partners.²⁶ This might be starkly at odds with the United State's interventionist track record, but it does mean that China is unlikely to get swept up in, much less draw Afghanistan into, a regional or global conflict in the near future.

Ultimately, it is clear that the geopolitical balance of the world is changing. With the majority of the world's population and a booming economy, China is quickly becoming a superpower able to exert more influence over its Asian neighbours than ever before. However, this in itself is not cause for concern. While the PRC does have strategic security, economic, and political interests in Afghanistan, the scope of relations have remained fairly narrow and do not directly challenge or undermine the mission of United States or Coalition Forces in Afghanistan.

²³ Tomas Joselyn, “Admiral Mullen: Pakistani ISI Sponsoring Haqqani Attacks” *The Long War Journal*, 22 September 2011.

²⁴ Brian R. Kerr, “Indian-Pakistani Competition in Afghanistan: Thin Line for Afghanistan?” *Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies Afghanistan*, Nov-Dec 2011.; Andrew Small “China's Caution on Afghanistan-Pakistan,” *The Washington Quarterly*, July 2010, pp. 89.

²⁵ Allissa J. Rubin, “Pakistan Urged Afghanistan to Distance Itself from the West, Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, 27 April 2011.

²⁶ Small, 89.