

China and Stability in Afghanistan: China's Afghanistan Strategy

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On January 18, 2016, China, Afghanistan, the United States and Pakistan sat down once again to try to forge a negotiated settlement to the continuing Afghan crisis.¹ These talks were held as the Taliban and other insurgent groups continue to make battlefield gains while the beleaguered Afghan Army is under sustained pressure. Efforts to persuade the Taliban to join negotiations for a political settlement have been less than successful. As the United States scales down its involvement, China has been playing an increasingly important and in many ways, positive, role in Afghanistan. In December 2014, China held tripartite talks with Afghanistan and the United States in London for seeking ways to find a peaceful solution to Afghanistan's problems.² China's increased involvement stems out of a combination of factors relating to security, economic and even social issues, sharing a small 56-mile border on its southwestern flank with Afghanistan. China's proximity to Afghanistan and its considerable financial power, along with its undoubted expertise in infrastructure development should make it a natural choice for a lead role in rebuilding Afghanistan's shattered infrastructure. China also has extensive plans to open up trade routes in Central Asia – its so-called Silk Road economic schemes—and instability in Afghanistan could prove to be potentially detrimental.³

China participated in the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue with Pakistan and Afghanistan from 2014 and has pledged to support Afghanistan's security and

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infrastructure development.⁴ Seeing great opportunity in developing Afghanistan's mineral resources – marble, copper and iron ore – China undoubtedly has sought to increase its involvement in Afghan affairs with a view to securing its own interests. It should be noted that China's concerns and involvement in Afghanistan intensified with the withdrawal of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) combat troops at the end of 2014.⁵ It has been a strong advocate for a negotiated settlement between the warring factions in Afghanistan, a position which would appear to rehabilitate the Afghan Taliban as a legitimate force. It should be stated that some of China's interest in Afghanistan is motivated by a growing sense of its own importance and perceived "responsibility" in this region.

China also has very real security concerns over the deterioration in the security situation in Afghanistan, with the Islamic State (IS) making its presence felt in Afghanistan and with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement seeking a separate homeland in the western region of Xinjiang province.⁶ In addition, the smuggling of narcotics from Afghanistan into China is of increasing concern as opium and heroin production increases in a lawless Afghanistan. It will, therefore, be argued that a combination of interlinked political, economic and security considerations form the basis for China's involvement in Afghanistan. It will also be argued that, to some extent, the interests of China and India are in concord, but it is equally true that the Chinese desire for a role for the Taliban in the governance of Afghanistan could open a Pandora's Box which could threaten to derail China's plans for its involvement in the country, and leave Afghanistan in an even more precarious position.

China has invested heavily in the Mes Aynak copper mine, which lies close to the site of major archaeological importance.⁷ The site, which may have reserves of 690 million tonnes of copper ore with about 1.65 percent copper, could create 10,000 jobs for Afghanistan and potentially bring billions of dollars in revenue to the cash-strapped Afghan economy.⁸ Afghanistan's considerable mineral wealth will inevitably see more Chinese interest in the country and for its part, lacking either the expertise or the capital to develop such extractive industries to their full potential, Afghanistan will welcome China's investment in such spheres.

In addition, China has pledged, in recent times, over US\$300 million in aid to Afghanistan through to 2017.⁹ This is in addition to previous assistance packages worth a similar sum up to 2014. With an Afghan economy reeling under the continuing strain of its security obligations as well as its continuing inability

to have a viable economic recovery plan in place plus ongoing budgetary shortfalls, China's economic assistance will be most welcome. In 2012, China also facilitated Afghanistan's getting observer status at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, giving a sign of Beijing's intentions towards Kabul.¹⁰ China also has significant investments in Afghanistan's Amu Darya oil fields. In late 2011, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) was awarded a contract for oil extraction.¹¹ When these investments are combined with China's Silk Road economic strategy aimed at linking Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East through a network of highways and railways, it is evident that China has invested a great deal that could be jeopardised with a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. Not only will the physical infrastructure be under direct threat from Afghan-based violence, but continued instability in that country will run the risk of spilling over into the neighbouring Central Asian countries.

China's preferred option of political reconciliation between the government in Kabul and the Afghan Taliban suffered a major setback with the revelation of the death of Mullah Omar in 2015, though he had actually died some two years earlier.¹² The new Taliban leadership initiated a series of devastating attacks in August 2015, indefinitely postponing talks between the Ashraf Ghani government and the Taliban.¹³ This was a major blow to the peace process that China was trying hard to facilitate. Mullah Omar's replacement, Mullah Mansour who is known to be close to Pakistan, may or may not be alive and this further complicates China's position in the Afghan political landscape.¹⁴

This setback has far-reaching consequences for China's Afghanistan strategy, along with its dynamics with Pakistan as Pakistan has been the strongest advocate of a role for the Taliban in Afghanistan's governance. The return to violence potentially endangers China's investments in Afghanistan which, as we have seen, are not inconsiderable. It is no secret that Afghanistan's beleaguered government would like China use its influence with its ally Pakistan to rein in the Taliban. A diplomatic "non-paper" seemed to indicate that Afghanistan had sought commitments from Pakistan to do the same in exchange for intelligence cooperation.¹⁵ However, it would appear that hopes for such action were stillborn as Pakistan has frequently reneged on its commitments in this regard. In addition, Pakistan still seems to view the Taliban as a guarantor of its own influence within Afghanistan. Pakistan has shown itself willing to act against Uyghur militants operating in its border region but despite its efforts against such militants and against Taliban affiliated terror groups operating in Pakistan, little has changed within Afghanistan itself.

Policy of Non interference and committed self interest may be inimical to China.

Continuing infighting within the Afghan Taliban, the growth of the IS and the death of Mullah Omar and confusion within the Taliban high command has impacted adversely on Pakistan's ability to exercise any degree of consistent control. Beijing's negotiation strategy runs the risk of negotiating with a wing of the Taliban that is unable to carry the bulk of the movement with it.¹⁶ Indeed, one might be tempted to suggest that China made the mistake of assuming that the Taliban was a monolithic entity with no internal conflicts and contradictions.

The rise of the IS and the defection of elements of the Taliban to it and to its broader ideological cause, combined with the increasing prominence of its affiliated Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IUM), will undoubtedly raise security concerns for China in Central Asia.¹⁷ The military capability of the IUM is such that it has the wherewithal and support required to potentially disrupt or sabotage China's Silk Route infrastructure projects. Combat experience and weapons flowing from the Taliban and IS, and the safe havens available to the IUM, would cause great concern for the Chinese.

Security will remain, for the foreseeable future, China's focus in Afghanistan.¹⁸ Of great concern to China will inevitably be IS endorsement of the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM).¹⁹ Uyghur unrest in China's Xinjiang province is increasing, although as yet, possessing limited military capability. The IMU has in the past given aid to the Uyghur militants along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and as the IMU is further absorbed into the IS, it is probable that the Uyghur militants will be able to avail of better training and weaponry to take on the Chinese authorities.

China has credited the recent upsurge in violent activity and some of its terrorism, in Xinjiang province to the ETIM and its new found alliance with the IS. In 2013, Uyghur elements drove a car into Tiananmen Square, killing two people;²⁰ 2014 was even worse with a horrific knife attack in March of that year at a railway station in Kunming in which 33 people were killed.²¹ This was followed by an even worse attack in May when a group of men drove two carloads of explosives into Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, ultimately killing 43 people.²² Given that these attacks were carried out with the crudest of weapons and with apparently minimal training, China would be greatly concerned as Uyghur fighters were among those detained during the US operations against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.²³ Their fate became the subject of considerable debate and international machinations when they were finally released. It should be noted

that in 2002, the Chinese identified as many as 400 Uyghur fighters operating in Afghanistan.²⁴ The return of battle-hardened militants, possibly with weapons from Afghanistan would be a security nightmare for China as it tries to contain the ethnic cauldron that is Xinjiang.

The ETIM has, rather ironically, benefitted from safe havens in the Taliban controlled provinces of Kunar and Nuristan.²⁵ China's insistence on Afghanistan's peace process involving the Taliban, therefore, seems all the more unrealistic and self-defeating. This is especially since China has stuck to a completely non-combatant role in Afghanistan, China, by its reluctance to provide either troops or security personnel – as India has done – for its projects in the country, has left itself depending on the capability, dubious though it may be, of the Afghan security forces.

Is it China's hope that a rapprochement with the Taliban, controlled by its ally Pakistan, would guarantee the security of its investments as well as end support to the ETIM? It is suggested that such an approach is not likely to bring the results China wants. It is proposed that such an approach can bring to China the worst of all worlds with an enfeebled Taliban rendered impotent by defections, a compromised Afghan government unable to protect its own borders and an ally in Pakistan with its own agenda in the region which may not always be concord with China's. China's approach adopts a different view of violent non-state actors completely at variance with that of the United States and India.²⁶ This could lead to discord between these players and further complicate the already fragile cooperation between the interested parties. Pakistan's continued provision of safe havens for the Afghan Taliban and the Uyghur militants fighting alongside them cannot be conducive to China's objectives in the region nor its security concerns.²⁷ Pakistan has acted against the ETIM and IUM militants but the confused nexus between these various groups precludes their effective neutralisation.

China has not provided Afghanistan with military assistance of a tangible nature, preferring to supply non-lethal equipment and training to the Afghan police force.²⁸ Pledges of assistance to Afghan security include an offer to train 300 police officers and 3,000 Afghan civilian professionals.²⁹ This is wholly in accord with China's low-risk approach to Afghanistan and the balancing act it has to perform given the differing interests competing in the country. While it may have some impact on an important Chinese concern – increased heroin trafficking into China – such assistance is minimal.³⁰ Such assistance does little to tangibly aid Afghanistan's government in boosting its military forces' ability to

fight the Taliban. Furthermore, it would appear that whatever hopes the Afghan government had that China would be able to use its influence with Pakistan to rein in the Taliban and lower the violence levels have been dashed.³¹ Beijing undoubtedly hoped that the Pakistanis would influence the Taliban to cease support for the Uyghur fighters affiliated with them. By refusing to either commit security personnel to protect its own projects or to participate in efforts to bolster Afghanistan's own forces beyond a bare minimum, Beijing's risk-adverse approach is trying to choose the path of least resistance by offending the fewest interest groups. However, this is not a practical approach to an Afghan situation that is spiralling beyond the Kabul government's ability to control.

Unlike the more proactive approach of India and in spite of China's much greater economic wherewithal to assist Afghanistan, the current Chinese stance is likely to end up pleasing none of the parties – not the Kabul government nor the Taliban. In attempting to adhere to a policy that hovers between non-interference and committed self-interest, China has put itself in a position where it must continuously walk a tightrope between competing interests, running the risk of offending everyone while trying to offend no one.

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Notes

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