



ANALYSIS

China's foreign policy in Afghanistan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 31 December 2014 NATO will hand over its final security responsibilities to local Afghan forces. The handover will raise new questions for Chinese policy in Afghanistan. On the one hand, Beijing wants a stable Afghanistan. It does not want the country to become either a haven for Uyghur militancy, or for instability to spread through the region. On the other hand, Beijing is reluctant to become too deeply involved in Afghanistan, conscious of the West's difficult experience over the last decade and fearful of attracting the attention of international terrorist groups.

Against this backdrop Beijing is unlikely to make any meaningful security commitment to Afghanistan. Instead China will continue to enhance its diplomatic and economic engagement with the country. Whilst Chinese analysts are uncertain about whether such an approach will ensure stability in Afghanistan, it is seen as China's least-worst policy option.

At the end of 2014 the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) will hand over its final responsibilities for Afghanistan's security to local forces. While a small but significant NATO and US security, training and support presence will remain in the country, more than a decade of direct effort led by the West to bring stability and security to Afghanistan will largely come to an end.

Western countries are not, however, the only ones with an interest and a stake in Afghanistan's security. China has long been concerned about the spread of extremist ideas and activism from Afghanistan through Central Asia and across its own borders, particularly into its westernmost territory, Xinjiang. This area is home to a Uyghur population, a predominantly Sunni Muslim Turkic ethnic group, of approximately ten million people. The Western military drawdown in Afghanistan therefore raises questions for China. This will be a defining period for China's relationship with its neighbour Afghanistan.

China has made a minimal security contribution to Afghanistan since 2001. Its aid commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction has been a very modest US\$250 million.¹ Diplomatically too, China took a low-key approach to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2012. Andrew Small of the US think tank the German Marshall Fund sums it up succinctly: "Until then [the end of 2011], China had sat completely on the sidelines. They just used to send people to read out statements in meetings."²

In the last two years, however, Beijing has struck a far more proactive tone. Beijing has pursued many multilateral and bilateral diplomatic tracks with Kabul and Afghanistan's neighbours. In 2012, the then security chief Zhou Yongkang made a visit to Kabul, becoming the most senior Chinese leader to visit the country in decades. In 2014 China appointed a special envoy to Afghanistan and committed to increasing its economic footprint in the country substantially.

Despite the extra diplomatic and economic emphasis, it is highly unlikely Beijing will commit any type of armed force to Afghanistan, instead leaving security responsibility to the new Afghan government. Beijing has seen the difficulties faced by the United States in Afghanistan over the past 13 years (and the Soviets and the British before them), and is sceptical of the effectiveness of foreign troops in the country.

Beijing's main interest is to prevent the spread of terrorism, and in particular terrorist ideology, into Xinjiang, as well to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a strong base for Uyghur militancy. It is not clear that leaving security in the hands of the Afghans, or indeed making huge economic investments in the country, will deal with this challenge. Of course, the other side of the equation is that committing

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militarily to Afghanistan would not necessarily deal with these challenges either.

The goal of this Analysis is to understand China's likely policy responses in Afghanistan in coming years. It will begin by outlining the challenges Beijing faces as a result of the withdrawal of ISAF. The following section will review the debate in China over the threat posed by Afghanistan. The final section will outline the contours of China's main policy directions.

Ethnic unrest and terrorism in Xinjiang have been an ongoing concern for Chinese authorities for decades.

DOES CHINA HAVE AN AFGHANISTAN PROBLEM?

Ethnic unrest and terrorism in Xinjiang have been an ongoing concern for Chinese authorities for decades. Uyghurs chafe under Beijing's rule in Xinjiang. Tensions have been particularly heightened since 2009, when nearly 200 people died in ethnic violence in the provincial capital of Urumqi.³

Violent attacks have increased in recent years and, on occasion, spread beyond Xinjiang. In October 2013, Uyghur terrorists were linked to an attack in which a car was set alight and driven into Beijing's central square, Tiananmen. The three occupants of the car and two bystanders were killed.⁴ In May 2014 a mass knife attack at Kunming train station in China's south killed 29 and left dozens injured. Within Xinjiang, 100 people died in violent incidents in the last week of June 2014, including 59 'terrorists' gunned down by police.⁵ A Communist Party-supported imam was stabbed to death in Kashgar in August.⁶ A further 50 people were reported killed in violence in Luntai County in September, including six people killed in bomb blasts and 40 people, described as 'rioters' by some state media, gunned down by police.⁷

This has prompted a stern security response. A tough approach to terrorism in Xinjiang is not new but the latest iteration seems even stronger than in the past. At a national security study session in April 2014, President Xi Jinping said that "[We must] make terrorists become like rats scurrying across a street, with everybody shouting 'beat them!'."⁸ There have been reports of significant numbers of Uyghur arrests in recent months,⁹ as well as door-to-door searches of homes. Substantial financial rewards are being offered to informants.¹⁰

Numerous government policies, both at the central and local level, cause Uyghur disgruntlement. Economic policies to promote Xinjiang's development have led to large-scale migration of Han Chinese to the province from other parts of China. There is a sense that the benefits of Xinjiang's economic development are not being distributed equally among different ethnic groups. At the same time, there is tension over state restrictions on religious expression. For example, 'Project Beauty', launched in 2013, is a program aimed at encouraging Uyghur women to dress less conservatively.¹¹ More recently, the city of Karamay

introduced rules to temporarily ban people who are sporting beards or wearing hijabs from catching the bus.¹² And there have been reports of Uyghur students or government officials being forced to break their fast during Ramadan.¹³

Xinjiang is important to the central government. It occupies one-sixth of China's landmass. It neighbours eight countries and sees significant cross-border trade. There are also substantial hydrocarbon and subsoil mineral deposits within Xinjiang, including an estimated 34 per cent of China's gas reserves, 40 per cent of coal reserves and 30 per cent of oil reserves.¹⁴ Similarly, significant amounts of gas and oil are imported via pipelines flowing from Central Asia through Xinjiang to China's east coast markets.

The problems China faces in Xinjiang are predominantly internal. Nevertheless there are important external connections, although their full extent is difficult to gauge given the lack of reliable, publicly available information.

Sunni Uyghur militant groups based near the Pakistan–Afghanistan border have claimed responsibility for a small number of attacks in China. The most prominent Sunni Uyghur militant group, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which is based in porous regions of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, claimed responsibility for several bus bombings in 2008 — although authorities denied terrorist involvement — and also for an attack in Kashgar in July 2011 that killed three dozen people.¹⁵ However, cases with clear foreign involvement remain the exception rather than the rule. External militant groups have not directly claimed responsibility for any attacks since the upsurge in violence in 2013.

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Although the capability of external Sunni Uyghur militant groups to launch attacks in China appears to remain limited, their ideological propaganda has become noticeably more sophisticated. Since 2012, the TIP has co-issued videos with the media wing of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The TIP publishes a quarterly Arabic-language publication, under editor Abdullah Mansour, called *Islamic Turkistan*. In 2012 Mansour emerged as the TIP's leader, and since then the group has issued increasingly frequent and more sophisticated videos praising attacks in Xinjiang. This has raised the profile of the organisation. In particular, the release of videos supporting the group knife attack in Kunming and the bombing in Urumqi in 2014 tied the narrative of these attacks to the TIP, even though there was no clear operational link.¹⁶

External links to the mainly domestic terrorist threat do not just emanate from Afghanistan. The spread of terrorist and religious propaganda into Xinjiang was consistently identified by Chinese interlocutors in research interviews as the greatest external threat to Xinjiang's stability.¹⁷ Online material can, however, be produced anywhere. For example, the TIP has a branch in Syria which is creating its own online content.¹⁸ Numerous interviewees also indicated that conservative Islam is

increasingly finding its voice among the traditionally moderate Uyghur population. This is seen as an indication of foreign influence over Uyghur religious practices.

A number of terrorist groups have also expressed ideological support for the Uyghur cause. In July 2014, Islamic State leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi said in a speech to rally global support that “Muslim rights are forcibly seized in China, India, Palestine.” In 2013, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri endorsed the right of militants to fight Chinese in Xinjiang. He has previously endorsed the “liberation” of Xinjiang, referring in 2012 to “China’s takeover of East Turkestan.”¹⁹

Even though this ideological support for the Uyghur cause hasn’t yet translated to identifiable operational coordination against Chinese targets, there is concern among numerous analysts that unrest and discontent in Xinjiang could be adopted as a cause by extremist groups in South Asia or the Middle East. In particular, the 2014 Al-Baghdadi speech received a lot of attention in China. Beijing is also concerned that any new instability in Afghanistan may spread more widely through Central Asia or South Asia, which too could have an impact on the security and stability of Xinjiang.

Chinese strategists and politicians view these risks as real and thus see a need to contribute further to the stabilisation of Afghanistan. Hu Shisheng of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) states, “Now with the US strategic focus shifting, neighbouring countries cannot just let Afghanistan descend into chaos.”²⁰ Li Wei, also of CICIR, indicates that: “Although the US will leave behind a level of military force, the pressure on terrorist forces in Central and South Asia will inevitably be eased...in this upcoming period pressure from terrorism in Xinjiang will be quite large.”²¹

DEBATING THE AFGHANISTAN RISK

If Chinese policy-makers broadly agree that stability in Afghanistan is an important Chinese interest, they diverge on the level of risk Afghan instability would actually pose to China’s security. Most experts agree that the threat of direct spill-over from Afghanistan into China is limited. China and Afghanistan are neighbours in name only: the border is a mere 92 kilometres long, and inaccessible. As Hu Shisheng of CICIR noted in an interview with *China Youth Daily*: “After the NATO withdrawal in 2014, the security threat to China’s western region is fairly indirect... direct entry from there [Afghanistan] into China’s Xinjiang is fairly difficult.”²²

There are three main schools of thought about the implications for China of ISAF’s withdrawal from Afghanistan. In the first school, some scholars feel that the ISAF withdrawal will actually improve the security situation in Afghanistan. Ren Xiao of Fudan University said in an interview with

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the author that the withdrawal of ISAF and US forces from Afghanistan may eliminate one of the drivers of conflict in the country. Li Xin of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies concurs, saying that an improvement in the security environment “was one of a number of possible future scenarios for Afghanistan.”²³

The second school of thought predicts a worsening of the security situation in Afghanistan in ways that increase the risk to China. Some Chinese analysts argue that the drawdown of ISAF will provide Uyghur militant groups with an opportunity to co-opt other terrorist groups to their cause, or that these groups could allow Afghanistan to function as a base for Uyghur militants. Hu Shisheng, for example, argues that: “The Pakistan and the Afghanistan Taliban are sympathetic towards the Uyghurs. So we absolutely have to pay attention to this, in a way that perhaps we did not before.”²⁴ A number of scholars argue that the uncertainty surrounding Afghanistan post-ISAF means threats could come from new or reinvigorated groups.²⁵ For example, Zhao Huasheng of Fudan University, one of China’s pre-eminent experts on Central Asia, points to a number of terrorist groups in Afghanistan and surrounding countries that could benefit from the troop withdrawal:

The strength of religious extremism and terrorism continues to expand. In recent years, established groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement [a name sometimes used for the TIP] have continued their activities. At the same time a number of new extremist organisations continue to emerge.²⁶

Finally, the third school of thought acknowledges that the troop drawdown in Afghanistan poses a significant threat to the stability of the region and to China, but hold that it can be largely managed domestically. For example, Pan Guang of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences wrote in 2013 that “China faces two major challenges in the region, first the withdrawal of the US and NATO from Afghanistan, and second Central Asia entering a period of leadership transition.” He added that this could lead to a number of threats, including trafficking of personnel and weapons into Xinjiang, the spread of extremist ideology, and closer cooperation between terror organisations. However, Pan stated in an interview with the author that, despite these threats and challenges, “the situation in Xinjiang can be controlled.”²⁷ Some scholars in the third school believe that the impact of Afghanistan’s security environment will be limited regardless of the Afghan situation, because problems in Xinjiang are mainly domestic.

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A CONSENSUS AROUND POLICY

Despite these different risk assessments, the policy response most Chinese scholars advocate is deep diplomatic and economic engagement, avoiding military intervention.²⁸ This is in line with current

government rhetoric. However, the level of security training to be provided is still a subject for debate among Chinese analysts, and government officials have not yet been explicit.

There are four main reasons why China is likely to avoid military intervention in Afghanistan. First and foremost, the efficacy of military intervention is seen as limited. Even an observer who sees risks in post-ISAF Afghanistan such as Zhao Huasheng, has argued against the military option: “The Taliban has existed in Afghanistan for some time and to eliminate it through military force is impossible.”²⁹

Second, Chinese policy-makers fear that military intervention would make China a target for non-Uyghur militant groups, something often referred to as ‘inviting trouble’ (引火烧身).³⁰ As noted in the previous section global, international terror groups have largely avoided China as an operational target, despite offering intermittent moral support to Uyghur militants. Beijing would like to keep it that way.

Third, there are serious questions about China’s military capability to handle a situation like Afghanistan. The modern People’s Liberation Army has very limited experience deploying combat troops overseas. Its combat capabilities are undoubtedly weaker than those of the ISAF forces.

The fourth reason China is likely to avoid military action is its long-held position of non-interference. This is not the major factor; interviewees for this paper consistently stated that Beijing’s reticence to intervene militarily is driven by weighing up the benefits and costs.³¹ Of course, in this instance there is no difference between the policy consensus and the principle of non-interference, so no decision needed to be made.

One can speculate about what China might do were the security situation in Afghanistan to deteriorate so badly that instability spread through the region. But even in this circumstance, all interlocutors indicated that China would be extremely unlikely to deploy military force into Afghanistan. The best (or only) response, as Shi Lan of the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences put it, would be to “strengthen one’s own immunity” (提高自己的免疫力).³² Thus any external threat to China’s internal security will likely be dealt with using the traditional methods of a strong security presence on the ground in Xinjiang, economic investment as an incentive for internal stability, and the curbing of online material.

OPTIONS FOR SECURITY COOPERATION

There are, however, options for China to take a greater role in Afghanistan’s security that do not involve military intervention. China has provided small-scale security training to Afghanistan, primarily in the form of mine clearance and counter-narcotics training.³³ China also signed an agreement with Afghanistan in 2012 to train around 300 Afghan police officers in China over four years, although this is a tiny

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proportion of an Afghan national police force that numbers approximately 150,000 members.³⁴ It is also overshadowed by the on-going NATO and US effort to support and train the Afghan National Security forces that will see some 9,800 US troops and 3000 troops from other NATO nations to remain in the country at the end of 2014. The number of US troops will halve by the end of 2015, with a minimal force left after 2016.³⁵

Training is one of the few areas where there is disagreement among Chinese analysts over the appropriate policy response. On the one hand, there is a fear that China would be inviting trouble from terrorist groups by being seen as a too-prominent backer of the Afghan security services.³⁶ On the other hand, provision of training would be a more direct way to shape the security and stability of Afghanistan.

One option would be to provide training or equipment for Afghanistan's security forces. Mine clearance or counter-narcotics training can be expanded relatively easily. Institutions in China may also run ad hoc classes in areas such as judicial training for Afghan security personnel. One of the more innovative training suggestions comes from Hu Shisheng. Along with co-authors Raffaello Pantucci of the Royal United Services Institute in London and Ravi Sawhney of New Delhi's Vivekananda International Foundation, Hu proposed that China and India could jointly train a "mineral-assets protection force" in Afghanistan.³⁷

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a political, economic and military grouping including China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan could also play a role, albeit limited. Shanghai University of Political Science and Law is developing a facility to promote judicial exchanges among the members of the SCO (国际司法交流合作培训基地).³⁸ It is specifically designed to provide legislative and judicial training for lawyers, counterterrorism personnel, border personnel and officials from judicial and enforcement departments from SCO full member countries.³⁹ This training could potentially be expanded to include Afghanistan nationals on an ad hoc basis.

The SCO could play a limited role in containing any new instability to Afghanistan. The organisation, after many years of debate, is likely to expand in the next year, with the Chinese MFA strongly supporting bids by India and Pakistan to become full members.⁴⁰ Iran too has been rumoured as a new member. If these nations are admitted, then every single nation bordering Afghanistan, with the exception of Turkmenistan, would be a member of the SCO. The SCO has a poor record of cooperation on a range of issues, including on Afghanistan — each member pursues its own Afghanistan policy.⁴¹ There are nascent signs that cooperation is improving just a little. In August 2014 the SCO staged its largest military training exercises since 2004. Similarly, the agreement on member expansion is another small indicator of cooperation. But

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distrust between Central Asian States is still widespread, and it will continue to hinder consensus in the SCO. Thus, cooperation will likely be restricted to joint exercises, non-military training, intelligence sharing and perhaps enforcement cooperation on non-traditional security issues.

Counter-narcotics cooperation between Afghanistan and China offers another area of potential collaboration. Until now, joint efforts have been on a small scale, but there are suggestions of further cooperation in this area. For example, Zhang Kun of Xinjiang University wrote in a journal article for the Yunnan Police Officers Academy that China should push for cooperation between Urumqi and Kabul airports to curb direct point-to-point drug trafficking.⁴² Several interviewees agreed that this kind of cooperation would be entirely feasible and desirable.⁴³ However, much of the drug traffic emanating from Afghanistan goes overland through Central Asia. China has pushed the SCO for an anti-drug function to be added to the Regional Counter-Terrorism Structure (RCTS).⁴⁴ So far this has not occurred formally, although some Chinese state media outlets recently wrote that “the SCO’s anti-terrorism organ has decided to crack down on drugs and cyber-crimes.”⁴⁵ Language and cultural limitations appear to be an issue as well. Liu Yi from Xinjiang Police Academy along with Zhang Kun, for example, have argued that a lack of capability in languages such as Pashto and Urdu is hampering the quality and speed of regional investigations into drug trafficking.⁴⁶

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ENHANCED DIPLOMACY

Since 2011, China’s diplomatic engagement on the Afghan issue has strengthened significantly. This will, in all likelihood, continue. There are two major threads to China’s diplomatic engagement on Afghanistan. The first involves strengthening bilateral relations with Afghanistan. In June 2012, China and Afghanistan declared a “strategic and cooperative partnership.”⁴⁷ China has strategic partnerships with dozens of countries; the exact title of the partnership varies for each country and there is no set definition as to what they entail, so their utility should not be overstated.⁴⁸ In the case of Afghanistan, it could be seen as a sign of increased Chinese focus on the country, with an emphasis on Chinese developmental contributions to Afghanistan, but not more than that.

In July 2014, China announced the appointment of a special envoy to Afghanistan—Sun Yuxi, a former ambassador to both Afghanistan and India. According to a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sun was appointed “to step up the communication with Afghanistan and all parties concerned and safeguard lasting peace, stability and development of Afghanistan and the region.”⁴⁹ What this exactly means is unclear. Other Chinese special envoys, for example in Darfur, have been quite active in mediation between opposite sides of a conflict.⁵⁰ This is less likely (but not impossible) in the Afghan case, given the prominent role the United States already has as a mediator. In the

Afghan context it is foreseeable that the envoy would at least act as point man for China between various groups within Afghan society.

China has long maintained contacts with a broad range of actors and groups in Afghanistan, including the Taliban.⁵¹ Since the Karzai government came to power in 2001, contact with the Taliban has often been via intermediaries. But more recently Beijing has reportedly been rebuilding the direct links it had with the Taliban prior to the US invasion in 2001.⁵² This will continue and perhaps strengthen after the ISAF withdrawal. Yang Cheng of East China Normal University frames engagement with a broad variety of groups as a way to promote an Afghan-led approach to the country's development:

China will continue to firmly support the 'Afghan-led, Afghan-owned' reconstruction process... China may maintain contact with all political and economic forces in Afghanistan, rather than just the central government, making it possible for all to participate in the Afghan peace mediation process.⁵³

Zhao Huasheng argues that China is likely to have continuing contacts with the Taliban:

Plans for Afghanistan and the Taliban are thus... long term and based on the consideration that China will have enduring interactions with the Taliban. Ultimately, China is not opposed to the organisation but is instead opposed to terrorism, separatism, and extremism.⁵⁴

The contacts that China fosters with the Taliban are an effort to reduce the space Uyghur terrorists can operate in. Beijing seeks guarantees that Afghanistan won't function as a base for Uyghur militant groups. It also wants Chinese investments in Afghanistan protected from Taliban attacks.⁵⁵ There are mixed views as to how effective this approach will be. Some Chinese sources say that the Taliban doesn't want to raise the ire of Beijing because of its relationship with Pakistan. Others question the Taliban's commitment to China's requests.⁵⁶ At the same time there have been numerous Taliban attacks on Chinese resource projects in Afghanistan.⁵⁷

The second major thread to China's diplomatic engagement in Afghanistan focuses on Afghanistan's other neighbours. Since 2012, China has vigorously pursued bilateral, trilateral and multilateral dialogues with countries surrounding Afghanistan. The 'Heart of Asia', a multilateral effort launched in 2011 in Istanbul, is aimed at getting Afghanistan's regional neighbours to take on a greater role in the country's future development. A meeting was to be held in the Chinese city of Tianjin in August 2014, but it was postponed due to the electoral deadlock in Afghanistan, which was only resolved in late September.⁵⁸

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In February 2012 the first Afghanistan–Pakistan–China trilateral dialogue at official levels was established, with the fourth round to be held in 2014 in Kabul.⁵⁹ The dialogue has spawned numerous other consultative mechanisms such as a Track-II Afghanistan–Pakistan–China dialogue first convened in August 2013.⁶⁰ Beijing has also established trilateral dialogues on Afghanistan between India, China, and Russia, as well as China, Pakistan, and Russia.⁶¹ These supplement significant long-standing annual foreign minister dialogues between Russia, China, and India trilaterally, and China and India bilaterally, which in recent years have included more involved discussions on Afghanistan.⁶² In addition, China and Russia hosted a 6+1 Dialogue on the Afghanistan issue in Geneva in March 2014.⁶³

China has also stepped up its engagement with the United States on this issue. Ambassador James Dobbins, Obama's special representative for Afghanistan, now has thrice-yearly meetings with his Chinese counterpart to discuss future areas of cooperation.⁶⁴ China and the United States have convergent interests in Afghanistan, so it is natural for both sides to seek common areas for cooperation and understanding.

Interlocutors indicated that Beijing hopes to achieve a consensus on the Afghan issue among surrounding countries, because they will be at the front line of containing any new Afghan instability. This includes attempts to increase regional cooperation on transnational crimes such as drug trafficking. Beijing will also encourage neighbouring countries to contribute as much as possible to Afghanistan's reconstruction.⁶⁵

Chinese analysts understand diplomacy's limitations regarding the issue of Afghan security, but it is one of the few policy options Beijing chooses to use in Afghanistan and thus it will be pursued actively. Shi Lan of the Xinjiang Academy for Social Sciences sums it up: "Dialogue is the best choice we have for solving this issue. Of course, I feel it may be difficult to achieve results with dialogue, but we have to try."⁶⁶

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ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT

China views economic engagement as its main contribution to securing stability in Afghanistan and the region.⁶⁷ Foreign Minister Wang Yi elaborated on this during a February 2014 visit to Kabul: "We hope to see the development of Afghanistan. Development is fundamental and only with economic growth can the poverty problem be solved and the foundations of terrorism and extremism be eliminated."⁶⁸

Three key factors will shape the nature of China's economic engagement with Afghanistan. First, and most obvious, will be the security situation. Protecting Chinese economic assets and personnel in Afghanistan has been difficult. The largest Chinese investment in the country, a copper mine at Mes Aynak signed in 2007, was attacked 19 times over the subsequent five years, and 40 Chinese engineers had

departed due to the security situation.⁶⁹ As Zhao Huasheng notes, “Chinese investors are powerless in the face of Afghanistan’s political, social, and religious conflicts, and China is incapable of solving these political and security problems on its own.”⁷⁰

China’s economic aid will likely focus, if the security situation allows, on its traditional strength of building basic infrastructure. Beijing will, however, pursue other aid options if the security situation does not allow work on infrastructure projects.⁷¹ Zhu Yongbiao of Lanzhou University indicates what the alternative might look like: “We can sustainably provide alternative crop seeds and demonstration projects, offer textbooks and facilities for schools and education institutions, expand the number of Afghan students studying in China, and increase the level of aid to Afghan refugees.”⁷²

The second key factor will be the attitude of Chinese enterprises. Some Chinese companies have already undertaken aid projects in Afghanistan funded by third-party countries, despite the security risk. If Chinese economic aid is expanded, one would expect that Chinese firms would continue to shoulder the risk of aid projects in the country. Firms also often have some level of control in the development of Chinese-funded aid projects, and thus lower-risk projects could be pursued.

It is unclear whether Chinese firms will be willing to bid on resource investment projects in Afghanistan. On the one hand, investment in Afghanistan’s significant undeveloped mineral deposits has great potential, as Zhao Huasheng writes, “to contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan’s economy by providing the country with capital, technology, and employment opportunities, as well as considerable profits and tax revenue.”⁷³ At the same time it gives China access to resources to drive its economy. In addition, Chinese firms have both the technical and local knowledge to competitively bid for resource projects. Both of the Chinese flagship resource investment projects in Afghanistan (the copper mine near Kabul and an investment in oil fields in northern Afghanistan) were the brainchild of local executives working in the region, rather than of the central government,⁷⁴ although both projects did receive significant government support.⁷⁵

On the other hand, China’s current resource projects in Afghanistan have faced setbacks. As mentioned above, both have suffered Taliban attacks. There is also the logistical challenge of transporting resources in a landlocked country with poor infrastructure. Numerous Chinese observers feel that China’s entry into Afghanistan’s resource sector was premature for these reasons.⁷⁶ Additionally, development of the copper mine near Kabul has been halted by the discovery of a rich archaeological site, which is being excavated. So, future resource investments face significant challenges. Much will hinge on Chinese resource companies’ willingness to operate in an unstable area and the profitability of individual projects.

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A number of Chinese firms have invested in smaller projects beyond the resource sector, in areas such as telecommunications. These generally carry a lower security risk than resource investments and are likely to continue. It is probable that the government will also back these projects, and that strong political and diplomatic support for investment will remain or even increase. The Chinese Government does have some influence in both resource and non-resource investments; it will continue to push Afghanistan to improve its investment environment. It could also offer policy or financial incentives for Chinese investors in Afghanistan.

A third factor in Chinese economic engagement in Afghanistan will be the attitude of the Afghan Government. Chinese interlocutors noted that requests from the Afghan Government will have some influence, particularly over the type of economic aid delivered.⁷⁷ This is consistent with approaches to Chinese aid seen elsewhere in the world, where the host government, either local or national, often suggests a project, or co-proposes it with a Chinese firm that seeks to access aid funding.

CONCLUSION

China has an interest in Afghanistan's long-term stability. ISAF's contribution to that goal has been uneven, but there is a real possibility that the security situation in Afghanistan will deteriorate further once ISAF's internal security role finally comes to an end. None of this, however, has produced in China any great desire to replace ISAF in Afghanistan.

China's main interest is ensuring that instability doesn't spread to Xinjiang. But Afghanistan is only one, relatively small, part of China's Xinjiang problems. The spread of extremist information is seen as the primary external threat to Xinjiang. These problems are not limited to Afghanistan, and cannot be solved by military intervention. More generally, China understands the limited returns from ISAF's 13-year mission in Afghanistan, and sees the rewards of direct military intervention as questionable. It also wants to avoid becoming a target for existing terrorist groups that have largely not attacked Chinese interests to this point.

Nevertheless, it is clear that China will not be totally passive in relation to Afghanistan and is stepping up its efforts to secure its long-term interests in the country, relying on its traditional strength of economic engagement, combined with a newly proactive diplomacy. The question is whether these limited means will achieve China's aims in Afghanistan. But for the moment, even those Chinese experts who consider the threats posed by the ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan to be grave favour China's current approach as simply the best way to play a tough hand.

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