



STRATEGIC FILE

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China's Evolving Stance on Afghanistan: Towards More Robust Diplomacy with "Chinese Characteristics"

Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar

On the eve of the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, China is modifying its so-far lukewarm policy towards this country. The potential for a security vacuum after 2014 has raised China's concerns about the situation in Afghanistan and its effects on the region, including possible terrorist attacks, an influx of militants, inter-ethnic fights, cross-border crime and more, all of which may have a negative impact on China's security and domestic stability. These possible threats have forced the PRC to adopt a more proactive approach towards Afghanistan. The scope of tools is wide, and include the appointment of China's first special envoy to Afghanistan, and a rising level of Chinese engagement in various international mechanisms focused on regional security. It creates a chance for the EU, to cooperate with Beijing on security issues.

Afghanistan's border with China is the shortest among all 14 of China's neighbours. Nevertheless, this 76 kilometre-long border (the Wakhan Corridor), which is difficult to pass due to demanding terrain, is seen in Beijing as a symbol of a vexing problem. The upcoming withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan¹ is being observed in China with growing concern. The PRC is afraid of potential instability in its western neighbourhood which may seriously damage state security. The scope of the perceived threat is wide, including drugs and weapons trafficking, problems with the safety of Chinese investments, and an influx of terrorists trained in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, including Uighur separatists who, according to Beijing, claim independence for the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR).² Recent terrorist incidents in China are seen as an evidence of the reality of these threats. Against this backdrop, China's so far low-profile approach towards Afghanistan is becoming a proactive stance. Rising activities in relations with Afghanistan and neighbouring states, the New Silk Road initiative, engagement in multifarious regional mechanisms, recent visits of high-ranking officials to Kabul, and the decision in July to appoint China's first special envoy to Afghanistan, may signal an evolution of Beijing's approach.

¹ The ISAF mission will be finished by the end of 2014, and from then the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF) will take full responsibility for security in Afghanistan. If Kabul signs relevant agreements with the U.S. and NATO there would be an advisory and training mission called "Resolute Support," and probably a separate anti-terrorist mission led by the U.S. See: W. Lorenz, M.A. Piotrowski, "NATO in Afghanistan after 2014," *Bulletin PISM*, no. 43 (496), 25 April 2013.

² XUAR was established in 1955. It represents 18% of Chinese territory and is a strategic part of China, sharing borders with Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and India, with abundant deposits of raw materials, and the home of the Lop Nor Nuclear Weapons Test Base. Xinjiang became part of Chinese territory during the Qing dynasty, in 1884. Xinjiang was partly independent in 1864–1877, 1931–1934 and 1944–1949.

China's Core Interests in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has never played a great role in Chinese diplomacy. However, Beijing has used Kabul in relations with great powers and for domestic reasons, and until the 1990s it played the Afghanistan card in its ideological game. For example, Beijing established relations with Afghanistan in the 1950s, at a time that Kabul had forged a relationship with Moscow, against the United States. Then, in the 1980s, Beijing acted in cooperation with Washington to provide Afghan anti-Soviet insurgents with arms, and trained Mujahidin.³ Currently, though, ideology does not play any role in China's diplomatic relations with Kabul, and Beijing is focused on its interests and taking a utilitarian approach towards Afghanistan. China's core interests are security and economic relations.

Security as a Top Priority

After the establishment of the Islamic Emirate then the overthrow of the Taliban, Afghanistan became pivotal for China, because of security concerns. Contrary to China's interests in other countries, in which the top goal is economic cooperation, in Afghanistan's case the fundamental aim and concern is security. For the PRC, the main interest is to maintain stability on its western border and prevent Uighur separatists from making contact with terrorists based and/or trained in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. Stability in the region is perceived as a prerequisite for China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Security was the main rationale for China's original contact with the Taliban⁴ and then, in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks, for the decision to join the anti-terrorist coalition and back the UNSC resolution authorising the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).⁵

China's main concern in Afghanistan is strongly connected with the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM) and others—organisations blamed for terrorist attacks in China. Beijing is convinced that they recruit and train Uighur separatists for the fight for an independent Xinjiang. For China, there is evidence of these assumptions, such as waves of terrorist incidents in the PRC. The most acute were those before the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and large-scale riots in Urumqi in July 2009. Recently, there has been a noticeable rise in terrorist incidents, not only in Xinjiang but also beyond, often before important political or symbolic events. Among the most spectacular were the explosion on Tiananmen Square (October 2013) before the third CC Plenum, the mass stabbing at Kunming railway station (March 2014) before a parliamentary session, the knife attack at Guangzhou railway station (May 2014), the double-suicide bombing at the Urumqi railway station on the last day of Xi Jinping's visit to Xinjiang (April 2014), and others. Despite the fact that there is no irrefutable evidence of direct involvement by either TIP or ETIM,⁶ appraisal of the attacks given by the alleged leader of this organisation suggests to the Chinese authorities that their suspicions are right.⁷

Beyond Afghanistan, stability in the whole region is also crucial to China's interests. Beijing is afraid of a spillover effect, destabilisation in bordering states, an influx of refugees and terrorists, and cross-border conflicts. Central Asia is seen as a region in which terrorist activities might be revived. Kirgizstan and Tajikistan, which share borders with China, are weak countries, with inter-ethnic conflicts and under threat from jihadist organisations, while Uzbekistan has ethnic disputes between Uzbeks and Tajiks, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is among the jihadi groups present there.⁸ Unstable situation in Pakistan under Nawaz Sharif, such as terrorist attacks and the weakness of a state that is often accused of supporting

³ M. Mansoor Ehsan, "Afghanistan–China Relations, 1955–2012," *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3/4, December 2013, pp. 236–239; Dai S., "China and Afghanistan," *The China Quarterly*, vol. 25, January 1966, p. 216; M.I. Wayne, *China's War on Terrorism: Counter-insurgency, Politics and Internal Security*, Routledge, London–New York, 2008, pp. 49–50.

⁴ A.S. Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*, London, 2010, p. 135; Y. Shichor, "The Great Wall of Steel: Military and Strategy in Xinjiang," in: S.F. Starr (ed.), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, 2004, p. 158; A. Small, "Why Is China Talking to the Taliban," *Foreign Policy*, 21 June 2013; A. Small, "Afghanistan: the View from China," *Alert*, no. 6, 24 January 2014, p. 2.

⁵ "Wajijaobu fayanen jiu meiguo dui Afuhan de junshi daji da jizhe wen" [China MFA's spokesperson answers question about the U.S.-led military action in Afghanistan], Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 October 2001.

⁶ "Country Report on Terrorism 2013," United States Department of State Publication, Bureau of Counterterrorism, April 2014, p. 55.

⁷ J. Zenn, "Terrorist Attack in Kunming Reveals Complex Relationship with International Jihad," *China Brief*, vol. 14, issue 5, 6 March 2014, pp. 8–9.

⁸ G.M. Hahn, "China and Central Asia after Afghanistan's 'Kabulization'," *Islam, Islamism and Politics in Eurasia Report*, no. 67, 14 October 2013, pp. 3–5.

extremist and terror groups to achieve its foreign policy goals, continue to deepen the internal crisis. The recent protests in Pakistan caused Xi Jinping to postpone his September visit to Islamabad. With the risk of a revival of jihadi elements comes a close connection with drugs trafficking (drugs come to China from the Golden Crescent: Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran) as a source of revenue for extremists plotting terrorist attacks.⁹

Regional security concerns were the main reasons for China's previous lukewarm approach towards the ISAF. The PRC refused to send its troops to Afghanistan, arguing that, except for peacekeeping operations endorsed by the UNSC, China does not dispatch soldiers abroad.¹⁰ Apart from this non-interference principle, the PRC was afraid of damaging relations with neighbouring countries and a revival of the "China threat" theory. In Chinese eyes the presence of the PLA may result in the Taliban's revenge through terrorist attacks in the PRC or on Chinese investments, workers and diplomats based in Afghanistan. In that sense, the PLA in Afghanistan might "close doors" for future cooperation with the Taliban.¹¹

Beijing is also reluctant to open the Wakhan Corridor, the narrow strip of land that connects Afghanistan and China. There were some suggestions from Washington that this channel could be used as an additional route for the Northern Distribution Network, but there has been no open and clear response from China, and the corridor remains closed. Beijing's rationale was to keep a distance from the United States.¹² Chinese experts also argue that it was a tactical decision not to diminish the relevance of Russia and Pakistan in cooperation with the U.S. in Afghanistan, and to avoid undermining China's good relations with Pakistan. Another reason is the fact that there is no formal China-NATO cooperation, and many NATO members maintain an arms embargo on China.¹³

For security reasons, the PRC officially refrains from a clear assessment of the situation in Afghanistan, using vague phrases (for example, "2014 is a key moment for the country"). But state media and experts argue openly that the current situation is not satisfactory, and that China is concerned with Afghanistan's situation. It is said there is a possibility that, after NATO withdrawal, the situation might be worse, including another civil war and an increase of non-traditional and trans-border threats.

Economic Interests

Apart from security concerns, China's interests also lie in economic engagement, especially access to raw materials and energy sources. Afghanistan has abundant and still untapped resources of copper, oil, gold, iron, cobalt, lithium, and others. The fact that Beijing backed the ISAF mission (albeit without any military engagement), recognised Afghanistan's Karzai government, and offers economic and development assistance while on the other hand maintains and even strengthens contact with the Taliban,¹⁴ gives China a better position in winning tenders for investments in Afghanistan. The symbol of China's economic interest is Beijing's victory in a bid for a \$3.5 billion controlling stake in the Aynak copper mine. So far this has been the biggest FDI in Afghanistan. It involves the construction of a coal-fired electrical power plant, a copper smelter, a freight railway, and the right to extract copper. In 2011, China signed a 25-year contract to extract oil in the northern provinces of Faryab and Sar-e-Pul in Amu Daria Basin. It would be the first major oil production in Afghanistan. But the security problems in the country (such as the many terrorist attacks in recent years) were the main reasons for delaying the scheduled implementation of these investments.

⁹ R. Weitz, "The Limits of Partnership: China, NATO and the Afghan War," *China Security*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2010, p. 24.

¹⁰ "Waijiaobu cheng bu cunzai Zhongguo paijun jiaru a lian jun wenti" [Chinese MFA said that the problem of sending Chinese troops to join coalition forces in Afghanistan is non-existent], *Xinhua*, 18 November 2008.

¹¹ See: Liu L., "Guanyu Zhongguo dui Afuhan zhanlüe de jidian sikao" [A few remarks about China's Afghanistan strategy], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, no. 8, 2010, p. 62; Zhang Li, "Zhongguo dui Afuhan jushi wending de zuoyong tansuo" [Analysis about China's role in stabilising Afghanistan], *Nanya Yanjiu Likan*, no. 4, 2010, p. 6.

¹² Zhao H., *China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives*, A Report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program, Center for Strategic & International Studies, March 2012, p. 8.

¹³ Liu L., *op. cit.*, p. 60; "Junshi zhuanjia cheng Zhongguo bu tai keneng xiang Beiyue kaifang Wahan zoulang" [Chinese military experts say that opening Wakhan Corridor for NATO is unlikely], 4 March 2009, www.sina.com.

¹⁴ A. Small, "Why Is China...," *op. cit.*; A. Small, "Afghanistan...," *op. cit.*, p. 2.

From Low Profile to Greater Visibility

Officially China still keeps a low and cautious profile in Afghanistan, trying to maintain proper relations with all political forces in the country, with neighbouring states, and with international forces present in Afghanistan. China's approach is based on the "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" principle, which respects Afghanistan's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the development path chosen by the Afghan people. Despite the fact that China supports strikes on every kind of terrorism, Beijing argues that military means are not the right tools to solve Afghanistan's problems. The prerequisite for stability is economic development and domestic reconciliation, and the latter was recently highlighted strongly by Chinese officials. Beijing supports engaging the Taliban in the process of ruling the country, and backed the Doha talks with the Taliban.¹⁵

But despite the official policy agenda, which generally highlights safety and stability through international assistance, enhancement of Afghanistan's governance capabilities, political reconciliation and reintegration, boosting economic development, and strengthening international cooperation (especially the UN's active role) in the reconstruction process,¹⁶ there has recently been a noticeable rise in Chinese activities in relations with Afghanistan, a signal of Beijing's concerns on the eve of the NATO troop withdrawal. Such activities are visible on both the bilateral and multilateral levels.

Deepening Sino-Afghan Relations

In bilateral cooperation, China is focused on frequent political dialogue. Beijing has so far preferred to receive visits from Afghanistan, than to send high-ranking Chinese officials to Kabul. The PRC chairman, the prime minister, and high-level Politburo members generally are not eager to visit Afghanistan. This model is probably a tool to make China less visible, with the aim of avoiding becoming a target for extremists, or to be associated with Karzai, who has a low approval rating in Afghanistan. One sign of a recent change in this approach came in 2012 when, for the first time since launching diplomatic ties with Afghanistan, Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang (China's security "tsar"—a significant portfolio) visited Kabul. It was the first high-level visit since 1966.¹⁷ Another example is the visit by Chinese minister of foreign affairs Wang Yi to Kabul in February this year, while in July China appointed its first special envoy to Afghanistan.

New political agreements are another mechanism for boosting political dialogue, but their content sheds light on Chinese concerns and interests. Joint documents focus on economic and security cooperation. In the economic sphere, both sides have agreed on joint exploitation of natural resources, cooperation on infrastructure projects, and increasing Afghan exports to China. The PRC has also announced that Chinese entrepreneurs would be encouraged to invest in Afghanistan, and have pledged to train Afghan officials and provide scholarships for students. In the security domain, both sides have agreed to fight terrorism, separatism and extremism, organised crimes, illegal immigration, drugs and weapon trafficking, using all means possible. In a strengthening strategic partnership declaration signed during Karzai's visit in September 2013, the two sides agreed to enhance efforts towards the smooth implementation of the two main Chinese investment projects in Afghanistan, which may be evidence that the Chinese investments are not, for security reasons, going well.¹⁸

China does not refrain from using economic incentives. These can be divided into financial assistance such as loans, grants, and infrastructural projects financed by China and implemented by a Chinese workforce (such as the irrigation system in Parwan, the state hospital in Kabul, and others), and Chinese economic engagement in Afghanistan in the form of investments, securing outlet markets and access to raw materials.

¹⁵ "China Welcomes Development in Afghan Reconciliation: Fm Spokeswoman," *People's Daily*, 19 June 2014.

¹⁶ "Yang Jiechi waizhang zai Lundun Afuhan wenti guoji huiyi shang de fayan" [A speech delivered by Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi at the International Conference in London about Afghanistan], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 28 January 2010; Zhao H., *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁷ He Ming, "Afuhan chongjian yu Zhongguo de zhanlue anquan" [Rebuilding Afghanistan and China's security strategy], *Yinduyang Jingjiti Yanjiu*, no. 1, 2014, p. 51.

¹⁸ See: "Zhongguo yu Afuhan fabiao lianhe shengming (quan wen)" [China and Afghanistan announce joint declaration], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 20 June 2006 and 23 March 2010, Beijing; "Zhong-A guanyu shenhua zhanlue hezuo huoban guanxi de lianhe shengmin (quan wen)" [A Joint Declaration about Deepening the Sino-Afghan Strategic Partnership], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 27 September 2013.

China is also trying to provide Afghanistan with economic assistance. For example, in 2012 China pledged to provide RMB 150 million, and RMB 200 million in 2013.¹⁹

China is also trying to become more visible by using “charm offensive” tools, such as offering training for Afghan security forces, which might be seen as an attempt to substitute Beijing’s refusal to send troops but nevertheless shows China’s commitment to Afghanistan security.

Multi-level Support for Afghanistan

Under the new Chinese leadership, Beijing would like to be seen as a responsible stakeholder that is accountable, and to defuse the “China threat” and “free riding” theories. China’s rising level of activity in Afghanistan is a chance for it to become more visible in the process of stabilising Afghanistan. It also gives China a springboard for boosting cooperation with other regional states, creating the agenda, mould regional coalitions, and underscore its pro-active stance, as well as to monitor and control any potential threat that may come from the neighbourhood.

Those factors can explain the PRC’s more active engagement on the multilateral level. First of all, China is more involved in the Istanbul Process, also known as the Heart of Asia²⁰ cooperation framework, which is the ministerial-level format established in 2011 that provides a rare regional platform devoted to Afghanistan. China decided to host this year’s meeting and make it highly visible. The senior official meeting was held in Beijing in July, as a preparatory event before the fourth ministerial conclave scheduled for 29 August in Tianjin. However, the delayed announcement of the Afghan presidential election results forced China to postpone this event.

Beijing will also host the next round of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral mechanism, launched in 2012. A similar meeting was held in Beijing in January this year between China, India and Russia. China also held a trilateral format meeting with Russia and Pakistan, and established a bilateral China-India mechanism on Afghanistan. Various mechanisms show China’s eagerness to cooperate with the main stakeholders, despite different or even conflicting interests. One good example is bringing together India and Pakistan, as this mechanism could be used by China as a tool for persuading Pakistan not to support extremists who destabilise Afghanistan and may spread their ideology in Xinjiang. Closer China-Indian relations (for example, Xi Jinping’s visit to India in September, and the decision to postpone his visit to Pakistan) in the context of the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan might be seen as a means to exert more pressure on Islamabad. While China’s rather close relations with Russia (despite Moscow’s role in the Ukrainian crisis, which is not beneficial for Chinese interests), may show China’s willingness to cooperate with Putin on Afghan issues.

China is also active in keeping Afghanistan engaged in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Beijing supported Afghanistan’s bid to become an SCO observer, and, at the Beijing summit in 2012, Afghanistan was granted this status.²¹ China also advocates strengthening security cooperation in the SCO. During his recent visit to Tajikistan at the 14th SCO summit, Xi Jinping announced his four proposals for strengthening the SCO’s role. The first point is devoted to security, and urges closer cooperation with observer countries.²² It is also worth mentioning that, in May, Shanghai hosted a Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures (CICA), during which Xi announced its security concept based on cooperation with Asian states.²³ Afghanistan is a CICA member.

China’s multilateral diplomatic tools embrace frequent high-level visits to neighbouring states. Since March 2013, Xi Jinping has visited eight and Li Keqiang three countries from the region. The most visible tool for enhancing multilateral cooperation with Central and South Asia is the New Silk Road initiative, announced in September 2013 during Xi’s visit to Kazakhstan. The new policy is focused on strengthening economic

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Heart of Asia countries are: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and the United Arab Emirates.

²¹ Zhao H., *op. cit.*, pp. 9–14.

²² “Xi Jinping zai Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi cheng yuanguo yuanshou lishihui di kisi ci huiyi shang de jianghua (quanwen)” [A speech delivered by Xi Jinping at the 14th SCO Summit (full text)], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 12 September 2014.

²³ A. Gradziuk, “China’s Interest in Its Cooperation with Russia,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 76 (671), 30 May 2014.

ties and improving connectivity (through accelerating transport cooperation) with Central and South Asia and Europe. A generous economic offer for these countries, and high-level state visits under the framework of strategic partnership, might be interpreted as a means to strengthen cooperation with these countries, which are not fully stable and have problems with terrorism, as an indirect tool in defusing potential threats from Afghanistan. There are also claims that Xi's landmark visit to Europe early this year was intended to win more allies for cooperation on the Afghan problem.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Security is a top priority for Chinese leaders. Apart from North Korea and simmering territorial disputes with Japan and Southeast Asian states, recent terrorist incidents in China and deteriorating security in the Middle East and South Asia mean that the stability of the PRC's western and southern borders have become Beijing's main concern. Afghanistan is one of the main sources of potential instability. The use of NATO's presence in Afghanistan to secure China's interests, a comfortable situation for Beijing, is coming to an end, and the Chinese government is under pressure to bear the burden of such security conundrum.

However, the new pro-active approach should be perceived through the prism of the so-called "Chinese characteristics" slogan. Real engagement in the region by Beijing, either "hard" (including military involvement such as sending troops or selling weapons) or "great" (such as taking a lead) is still unlikely. Beijing is not eager or ready to be directly involved in Afghanistan, associated with new NATO and/or U.S. missions, or prepared and to take responsibility. Rationales are the same as in the past – not to upset the Taliban and to maintain good relations with all political forces in Afghanistan and the neighbourhood. Taking into account various interests in the region, Beijing is in fact adjusting its balancing attitude. It seems that the new policy might be named as an "active low-profile approach," based generally on wider regional cooperation in order to engage more stakeholders to bear the burden and to blur responsibility. China's cooperation with almost every country from the region, its rather positive attitude towards the new mission in Afghanistan, eye-catching promotion of regional security cooperation mechanisms (CICA and the SCO, the Istanbul Process, trilateral dialogues, and so on), and the New Silk Road concept, are clear evidence that China would like to see Afghanistan's neighbours play a greater role while it pursues a similar utilitarian and nuanced approach as before. However, without extensive NATO engagement, China is forced to cooperate with a wider scope of partners, and to weave a network of close ties between states in order to safeguard its own interests. In that sense, China intends to continue its traditional policy but with modified instruments, such as a focus on diplomatic efforts and economic assistance, and performances, such as playing a more visible role on international and regional security forums, to show its commitments and non-dependence on NATO and U.S. forces.

Western countries have long been exerting pressure on Beijing to take more responsibility on Afghanistan. China's modified approach provides a chance for closer cooperation with Beijing. China, which is forging ties in the region, might be a source of information about the situation in Afghanistan and even a mediator in Afghan reconciliation.²⁴ Although the EU and U.S. cannot expect deep cooperation with China (the PRC's ambiguous policy is a serious barrier, and the Chinese stance on the Ukrainian crisis is a good example of this), the fact that Beijing is more active and has more contact with other stakeholders is a real asset. The EU should consider maintaining regular contact with China, in order to consult on security risks or at least be informed about the situation in Afghanistan and Central Asia. What is more, the EU should attend meetings of international mechanisms supported, hosted and attended by China. They are potential sources of inspiring ideas to be utilised not only for Afghanistan, but also in connection with the security issues in the EU's neighbourhood.

²⁴ A. Small, "Why Is China...", *op. cit.*