

Greater Sino-American cooperation needed in Afghanistan

Written by Elizabeth Wishnick

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ELIZABETH WISHNICK, AUG 12 2011

In July 2011, the United States military began its scheduled withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, when 650 soldiers from the 113th and 114th Cavalry Units returned home. Considering China's unease with a large foreign military presence on its borders, one would expect the U.S. drawdown to be welcomed in Beijing and result in greater U.S.-China cooperation on Afghanistan. However, the U.S. and China have different goals and timetables regarding this conflict, which pose challenges to their bilateral relationship.

In a June 22nd speech U.S. President Barack Obama announced that 10,000 American troops would be withdrawn by the end of the year, with up to 23,000 more by the end of 2012, his original withdrawal date for U.S. forces. The recently announced drawdown would return home the additional 30,000 troops President Obama sent to Afghanistan as a part of his 2009 surge strategy. This would leave about 68,000 U.S. troops in the country. According to the President's timetable, the withdrawal process would accelerate in 2013 as Afghan forces assumed greater responsibility for their security and be completed by the end of 2014. The U.S. forces are the largest contingent of a total of 150,000 troops under NATO command. All are scheduled to leave by the end of 2014.

In a July 25th speech, Ryan Crocker, the newly appointed U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, cautioned that there would be no 'rush to the exits.' Although he denied that the United States sought permanent basing in Afghanistan, the two countries are planning on developing a strategic partnership that could involve an American military presence even after the formal withdrawal deadline. China remains concerned about this prospect, but the alternative—a premature withdrawal of foreign forces—also poses risks of increased terrorism and political instability in the region.

The Chinese government responded cautiously to the U.S. drawdown announcement. While welcoming the stated goal of the United States to make Afghanistan responsible for its own security and respect its sovereignty, Chinese officials have expressed concern in recent weeks over the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and political instability there.

The United States is pursuing three overlapping tasks in Afghanistan: using military force to defeat Al Qaeda networks and Taliban insurgents; supporting political, social and economic development in Afghanistan and Pakistan; and engaging in diplomacy to end the conflict and provide lasting security in the region. With the death of Osama Bin Laden on May 1, 2011, American officials see the weakening of Al Qaeda networks within sight. However, political instability, pervasive corruption and the dominating role of the drug economy have stymied progress on the second set of goals.

The U.S. and China have different priorities in Afghanistan, complicating the process of regional engagement on the country's future. For the United States the military mission has taken up the lion's share of American spending on Afghanistan—444 billion USD since 9/11. Half of the 51.5 billion USD in assistance funds budgeted from 2001 to 2010 have gone to training and equipping Afghan security forces. Remaining funds have placed a priority on counternarcotics programs, governance projects and infrastructure development.

Despite its concerns over the spillover effects of terrorism and drug trafficking for China, especially in the Xinjiang

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Uygur Autonomous Region, the Chinese government has contributed relatively little to regional aid efforts, just 200 million USD over the past decade. While Washington has focused primarily on immediate security priorities, Beijing has been pursuing a long-term economic strategy to integrate Afghanistan into the web of Chinese infrastructure and resource projects in Central and South Asia. Thanks to the 3.5 billion USD Aynak copper mine project and related infrastructure development, China is now the largest investor in Afghanistan.

Although each strategy has its merits, neither is likely to be successful on its own. There has been some grumbling in the U.S. that China will benefit economically from the U.S. military effort. But without viable development, how will Afghanistan wean itself from its now overwhelming dependence on foreign donors for its legal revenue? Development, however, has been plagued by corruption as the recent revelation of the diversion to the Taliban of 3.3 million USD of a 2.16 billion USD U.S. transportation contract in exchange for safe passage of convoys. Moreover, China's long-term plans for resource exploitation in Afghanistan will be impossible to fulfill in the absence of a stable government and adequate security.

China has not been willing to provide security, preferring to support its ally Pakistan's efforts instead. Ironically, both China and the United States are hamstrung by their reliance on ties with Pakistan. To emerge from this plight the U.S. has sought to diversify its regional outreach by creating alternative supply routes for Afghanistan through Russia and Central Asia. Most recently U.S. counternarcotics officials have been developing a new Central Asian initiative to share information more readily among Central Asian states, Russia and Afghanistan. China, however, seeks to promote cooperation with Central Asian states and Russia within the context of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a ten-year old regional initiative that excludes the United States.

At times the United States and China have collaborated in Afghanistan—a Chinese contractor joined in the construction of the ring road so essential to NATO military effort. However, according to U.S. diplomatic cables obtained by Wikileaks, in 2009 the Chinese government rejected a request by the Obama Administration to help supply non-lethal aid for the Afghanistan war effort via the Wakhan corridor, the thin strip of mountainous territory bordering on China.

Despite their different approaches, the United States and China share common interests in the security and stability of Afghanistan. A lasting and stable peace will require greater Sino-American cooperation as well as their support for inclusive regional dialogue.

Elizabeth Wishnick is an Associate Professor of Political Science and Law at Montclair State University and an Adjunct Associate Research Scholar at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University. Originally published here.