

## **Afghanistan: China's New Frontier?**

Written by Serafettin Yilmaz

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SERAFETTIN YILMAZ, DEC 19 2012

China and Afghanistan have a long history of relations which involved both the movement of goods and ideas. Tea and fruit were traded across the border, and Buddhism and Islam spread into China from Afghanistan. However, relations were impeded by the onset of great power competition between the United Kingdom and the Czarist Russia in the 19th century when Afghanistan served as a buffer and the existing links with China began to fade away.

Modern diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Afghanistan commenced in 1955 and the two countries signed a boundary treaty in 1963. After the pro-Soviet revolution in 1978 and the subsequent Soviet invasion, China became more involved in Afghanistan's internal affairs and took an active role in supporting the insurgency, providing aid for the anti-Soviet war efforts along with the US, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. Volunteers from Xinjiang joined the Afghan resistance, for which Kabul accused Beijing of supporting anti-government groups.

When the Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan and the new Republic was established under the leadership of Muhammad Najibullah, relations between the two countries were normalized. Yet, this did not last long and Beijing once again suspended all diplomatic relations when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1993. The Taliban's support for the Uighur rebels in China and provision of a safe haven for separatist organizations caused concern among the leadership in Beijing. Consequently, China did not object to the military campaign the US-led Northern Alliance carried out against the Taliban in 2001. Beijing established formal relations soon after the interim Karzai government took power.

President Karzai made his first visit to China as the head of the transitional government in 2002. He paid another visit in 2008 to attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. Karzai had a three-day trip to Beijing in 2010. Lastly, the two sides came together in June 2012 when Karzai met President Hu Jintao. The leaders decided to launch the China-Afghanistan Strategic and Cooperative Partnership in which they agreed to cooperate in the political, economic, cultural and security fields, as well as on regional and international affairs. On the Chinese side, the first visit was made by then foreign minister Jiaxuan in 2002. Another high level visit was paid by Yang Jiechi in 2007. The common theme in these meetings was a reiteration of China's policy of non-interference and a mutual respect for sovereignty.

Despite of a resumption of relations and official visits, Beijing kept Afghanistan at arm's length for most of the past decade and pursued a cautious engagement policy. It rejected providing assistance for the US and ISAF forces and refrained from committing combat troops for war efforts. In short, the PRC government observed non-interference in Afghanistan's domestic affairs, which elicited negative comments in the Western media.

### **The Dynamics of China's Afghanistan Strategy**

China's policy toward Afghanistan is composed of three major dynamics: The first, and the most important, is security. It is seen that China is concerned about the spread of separatist ideology from Afghanistan across its Northwestern territories via radical factions that hold religious affinity toward the Uighur minorities in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. On the one hand, the PRC government is trying to improve the situation on the ground through large scale public investment, and, on the other, it is executing a precise strategy of isolating Afghanistan, which

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includes sealing off the narrow Wakhan Corridor and shying away from directly interfering in the country's domestic affairs

The second dynamic is commercial interest. Afghanistan's rich mineral deposits offer opportunities for Chinese private and public companies. Large scale telecommunication and transportation projects provide another incentive for investors. If Afghanistan reaches a certain level of stability and prosperity with a growing population, it may become an export and manufacturing destination for Chinese producers looking for new markets and cheap labor. Also, China wishes to use Afghanistan as a transit route for oil originating in Iran.

Public diplomacy is the final dynamic in China's foreign policy strategy toward Afghanistan. China aims to expand its soft power in the war-torn country, a policy which is exemplified in the establishment of the Confucius Institute in Kabul. It follows that rather than utilizing hard power and assuming the role of a post-invasion policeman, Beijing opts for cooperation and dialogue in its Afghanistan policy. Below is a more detailed analysis of this three-tier policy.

### *Security*

NATO's decision to gradually withdraw combat troops from Afghanistan by 2014 seems to change the game played out in Afghanistan by bringing some actors closer into Afghan geopolitics whereas pushing others further away. China may be one of the major players to be more directly influenced from the NATO withdrawal.

As has been mentioned above, China did not object to the allied operations to topple Taliban. It is in China's benefit if the US-led coalition continues to maintain security and keep the insurgency in check. However, China may also have certain qualms. First and foremost, Beijing worries that it is being militarily encircled by the US on its western flank at a time when the US naval build-up is growing firmer from the northeast to the southeast. Second, if NATO operations get denser as the pull-out approaches, radical groups might attempt to seek sanctuary in the restive areas in northwestern China and simply wait for the deadline for the withdrawal. Third, explicit Chinese consent of the US actions in Afghanistan may portray the government negatively, as compliant to the US in the eyes of the regional publics and their governments, to whom Beijing is dependent for most of its oil purchases. Hence, the Chinese strategy needs to be based on equilibrium between the expected diminishing role of the US and the new dynamics that will unavoidably arise from a post-invasion power vacuum.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was created in part in response to the events unfolding in Afghanistan. It is anticipated that it will fill the vacuum as a viable regional institution that has both Russia and China as its full members and Afghanistan, Iran, India and Pakistan as observer partners.

In its various statements and briefings, the SCO followed Beijing's line of policy, citing terrorism and drug trafficking as its primary concerns. For instance, at the sixth meeting of the Secretaries of the Security Council of the SCO held in Astana in April 2011, the parties identified the continuing instability in Afghanistan as one of the main sources of threat to the peace and stability in the region.

It is clear that the SCO will continue to be a crucial component in China's security-related strategy in Afghanistan as it assumes a more comprehensive role in the coming years. Hence, although China has concerns as to both the infiltration of terrorist groups into China from Afghanistan, and drug trafficking, in addressing those threats, it prefers multilateral channels such as the SCO.

### *Economics*

Although China-Afghanistan trade volume started off with a meager \$20 million in 2002 and reached over \$700 million in 2010, China still lags behind the US, India and Pakistan in exports and imports. However, China is eager to be part of the postwar rebuilding of Afghanistan. Therefore, in recent years, Chinese firms have begun to invest in projects such as resource extraction and processing, telecommunication, and public infrastructure.

One of the most publicized large scale investments (the largest foreign investment in Afghan history, to be exact) was

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launched in 2008 by China Metallurgical Group (CMG) and Jiangxi Copper which won the development of Aynak copper mine in Logar province. Another strategically important project that a Chinese firm won was the development of oil and natural gas reserves in Afghanistan's Sari Pul and Faryab provinces. The contract, signed in 2011, has been the first under which the Afghan government allowed a foreign company to exploit natural gas and oil on its soil.

In addition to oil and copper, the discovery of large reserves of other industrial metals such as gold, cobalt and iron gives a big commercial incentive for China's state-owned and private enterprises in their plans beyond 2014. Thus, although some of these projects are mired with problems and criticized for being over-ambitious and economically unfeasible, they are important in demonstrating China's willingness to play an active role in Afghanistan's economic development.

Finally, given China's ever growing dependency, Afghanistan, a bordering country with rich untapped resources, may play a big role in China's energy policies in the coming years if stability and security is restored and maintained. Such projects as building a railroad between Iran and China via Afghanistan may further enhance Beijing's strategic depth into the Persian Gulf. The PRC government knows that time is on its side and, absent a major diplomatic disaster, the goodwill accumulated through the decade of US-led occupation will render China a close trade and investment partner for the Afghan government.

### *Public Diplomacy*

China has often been accused of attempting to reap the benefits in Afghanistan without contributing to its security. Indeed, China has taken pains not to be seen as militarily involved in Afghanistan on the side of the coalition that is considered invaders by the majority of Afghan public. To that effect, Beijing continued to reject suggestions that it contribute troops to the ISAF or join the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) by allowing supplies for the NATO forces to be transported via its territory.

China's unwillingness is largely driven from its strategy not to militarize its relations with Afghanistan. China realizes that the lack of security and political stability in Afghanistan will have implications for its own internal peace across the northwestern territories. However, it is also clear that a loss of public trust will have consequences in the long term in terms of missed trade and resource acquisition opportunities. Hence, the public opinion needs to be carefully managed. Therefore, one of the important tasks is not to be perceived as catering to the Western interests.

The establishment of the Confucius Institute at Kabul University as part of a cultural exchange agreement in 2008 has been a symbolic sign of China's policy of multilevel engagement. Even though the project is in its infancy, it is still a crucial step in extending China's soft power as part of its comprehensive Afghanistan strategy. However, Chinese policies may not be enough on this front: A 2012 survey conducted by the Asia Foundation found that, asked as to which country has provided the most aid, only 2% mentioned China. Japan, for example, fares much better in this area. Hence, China still has a long way to go to create a public awareness of itself as a constructive contributor to Afghanistan's development.

### **Conclusion**

It follows that China's strategy toward Afghanistan is a long-winded undertaking. It is based on the dynamics of security, commerce and public policy. These strategic preferences show that the CCP government is cognizant of Kabul's importance for the nation's economic and geopolitical interests. Accordingly, Beijing's ultimate objective is to create an area of stability across its western periphery, have a secure corridor into the energy rich Middle East region, develop comprehensive trade and investment opportunities, and spread the Chinese soft power to increase the country's overall strategic reach.

In conclusion, Chinese policies in Afghanistan may be seen as part of a larger experiment of a *Pax Sinica* through which China, under the institutional umbrella of the SCO, would lead a secure and prosperous region. Afghanistan, in this context, offers a test ground for China's regional strategy. Given that the UK, the USSR, and most recently, the US failed militarily in Afghanistan, any Chinese achievement will serve as a testament to the viability of Beijing's

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international governance model.

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*Serafettin Yilmaz is a doctoral candidate in Asia-Pacific Studies (IDAS) at National Chengchi University (NCCU) in Taiwan.*

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### **About the author:**

**Serafettin Yilmaz** (Yao Shifan), PhD, is an Associate Professor in School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University, China. His research interests include energy security, global governance, and East Asia regional development. His articles have appeared in *Asian Politics & Policy*, *Asian Perspective*, *Pacific Focus*, *Asia Europe Journal*, *Energy Strategy Reviews*, *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, *Issues and Studies*, and *International Critical Thought*.