



Chinese President Xi Jinping (L, front) and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai inspect the guard of honour during a welcoming ceremony before their talks in Beijing, China, on 28 October 2014.

Image Courtesy: Ding Lin/Xinhua

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CHINA IN AFGHANISTAN

BALANCING POWER PROJECTION AND MINIMAL INTERVENTION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As it was foreseen, the initial months following the start of the Northern Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) withdrawal from Afghanistan were harsh for the Afghan government and civilians.² In April 2015, the Taliban launched their annual spring offensive 'Azm' - their most elaborate attack since they were overturned from power in 2001³. With a majority of the Afghan provinces under attack, this nationwide operation is challenging the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and has displaced nearly a million citizens.⁴ This plight brings to mind the chaos following the erstwhile USSR's Red Army's departure in 1989 that led to the fall of the former Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah's government three years later. The international community is worried that the current dispensation in Kabul may suffer the same fate if the ongoing issues are left unaddressed.

Since he came to power, incumbent Afghan President Ashraf Ghani believes he has the optimal solution: "The problem, fundamentally, is not about peace with Taliban...The problem is fundamentally about peace between Pakistan and Afghanistan."⁵ He decided to bank on Islamabad to bring peace in Afghanistan. Given the long-standing Pakistani interference in Kabul's affairs, there has been scepticism about Islamabad's truthful support. The 7 August 2015 attacks substantiated worries. But Ghani reached out to a third party, China, in order to guarantee Islamabad's dedication to the peace process.

This paper aims to provide a brief overview of Beijing's response to President Ghani's request, before evaluating the former's ability to become a game-changer for Afghanistan. This analysis first highlights the key features of China's foreign policy, and then contextualises Afghanistan in that foreign policy calculus. It proceeds to assess China's bid in Afghanistan, before concluding with a review of the unlikely prospects of this intervention.

²A recent UNAMA report estimates that on average, 9 Afghan civilians were killed and 18 injured every day in the first half of 2015. See: "Civilian Casualties Remain at Record High Levels: UNAMA", *TOLO News*, 5 August 2015, available at <<http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/20752-civilian-casualties-remain-at-record-high-levels-unama>>

³Leading Council of the Islamic Emirate, *Statement regarding the inauguration of Spring Operations called 'Azm' (Resolve)*, 22 April 2015, available at <<http://shahamat-english.com/english/index.php/paighamooona/54149-statement-by-the-leading-council-of-the-islamic-emirate-regarding-the-inauguration-of-spring-operations-called-%E2%80%98azm%E2%80%99-resolve>>

⁴"Afghans who once watched war from a far forced to flee as front lines shift", *The Washington Post*, 13 July 2015, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/number-of-afghans-forced-from-home-soars-to-highest-level-since-taliban-era/2015/07/13/816fd27e-19d1-11e5-bed8-1093ee58dad0_story.html?postshare=1051436860854699>

⁵"Afghan President: Pakistan Is Why Peace with Taliban Is Possible", *USIP Publications*, 25 March 2015, available at <<http://www.usip.org/publications/2015/03/25/afghan-president-pakistan-why-peace-taliban-possible>>

CONTEXTUALISING CHINA'S POLICY VIS-À-VIS AFGHANISTAN: KABUL IN BEIJING'S WORLD VISION

Sustaining Growth

During the 18th Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the new Chinese administration outlined guidelines to chart its foreign policy for the coming years. First was the idea of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” or the “Chinese dream” (Zhōngguó Mèng). This basically aims at building a “harmonious socialist modern country” by 2049. Although based on domestic development and the sustainability of growth, this “dream” is far from concerning national issues alone. China’s export-led growth model relies on the stability of the international order since its domestic market is unable to purchase everything the country produces. Chinese economic interests are therefore related to wider strategic stakes. Kabul is directly related to this because destabilisation in Afghanistan could disrupt trade in the entire region.

In 2013, Xi Jinping announced the ‘One Belt One Road’⁶ (OBOR) plan, a new development strategy to counterbalance China’s “new normal,” i.e. a growth rate decline. This programme is envisioned to provide new markets for Chinese surplus capacities as part of the solution to ensure sustainable growth. Basically, the OBOR aims at creating a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways and telecommunication facilities connecting China with Europe and Africa. Yet, lasting insecurity in Afghanistan bothers Chinese leaders, who want to prevent turmoil in the vicinity of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), the land-based component of OBOR. They envision that the SREB could enhance China’s energy security by diversifying supply routes through Central Asia and South Asia. With approximately 60 per cent of its oil being acquired via imports⁷ mostly from West Asian countries,⁸ the country relies heavily on the security of its sea lanes. Yet, growing tensions in the South China Sea and piracy in the Malacca Strait pose a threat to the safety of China’s energy transport corridors.

⁶Ministry of foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, *President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries*, 7 September 2009, available at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml>

⁷“China Is the New Power Broker in the Persian Gulf”, *Foreign Policy*, 26 March 2015, available at <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/26/chinas-thirst-oil-foreign-policy-middle-east-persian-gulf/>>

⁸International Energy Agency, “People’s Republic of China”, *Oil and Gas Security*, 2012, available at <https://www.iea.org/publications/freepublications/publication/China_2012.pdf>

Although the OBOR and the SREB routes are still in the planning stages and the proposals conscientiously avoid passage via Afghanistan, concerns about protecting them from any instability in the latter have arisen.

Ensuring Domestic Stability

In recent years, China has experienced a fairly good security situation and Chinese policy-makers expect the country's neighbourhood "to remain generally peaceful."⁹ While Beijing has never experienced such a level of stability in its neighbourhood, the Chinese leadership do feel vulnerable. The CPC is of the opinion that its fate is linked to national unity and is therefore extremely interested in addressing insecurity. According to Beijing, relative stability in the neighbourhood is an opportunity to address internal threats the country still faces.

For China, maintaining social order in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is probably the most significant internal problem related to Afghanistan. The Uyghur unrest is not the most burning internal issue but with the expansion of Turkic nationalism and religious fundamentalism, Beijing is watchful. Fighting separatism in the XUAR has even become a national core interest¹⁰ (Hexinliyi), i.e. part of the "non-negotiable bottom-line" of Xi Jinping's policy. Domestically, Beijing is pursuing a "carrot and stick approach" – which involves uncompromising policies against separatism as well as efforts to promote economic development in the region, simultaneously. The "Go-West" campaign launched in the 2000s has had results but has not prevented ethnic unrest in the XUAR from escalating.¹¹ For example, the 2009 Urumqi riots in which 156 citizens died and 1700 were injured,¹² mostly ethnic Han, were one of the bloodiest incidents since the CPC assumed power in the country. The Chinese leaders' worst nightmare would be the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) separatists gaining support

⁹The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Military Strategy", *White papers*, May 2015, available at <<http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/>>

¹⁰Ministry of foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Address by Hu Jintao President of the People's Republic of China At Islamabad Convention Centre*, 26 November 2006, available at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_663354/2757_663518/2758_663520/t285917.shtml>

¹¹"Beyond Doubt: The Changing Face of Terrorism in China", *The Diplomat*, 28 May 2015, available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/beyond-doubt-the-changing-face-of-terrorism-in-china/>>

¹²"Innocent civilians make up 156 in Urumqi riot death toll", *Xinhua News*, 05 August 2009, available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-08/05/content_11831350.htm>

from external troublemakers. That the Uyghur diaspora is well-established¹³ in the Central Asian Republics (CARs) adds to China's worries. However, although Beijing tends to club all forms of separatism in the same category as terrorist acts, the Uyghur issue cannot be categorised under violent action alone.

In the eyes of China's leaders, Afghanistan has become the epicentre of Islamic fundamentalism for several decades. They believe militant groups have supported the ETIM¹⁴ and fear that Afghan instability and radicalism could encourage unrest in its own western provinces. Furthermore, the Afghan security situation is significantly worrisome for Beijing, especially because several Afghan militant groups pledged their allegiance to the Islamic State (IS).¹⁵ China perceives its neighbourhood, including Afghanistan, as a crucial asset in preventing internal threats from expanding. Therefore, China's leaders have sought to ensure that the ETIM separatists receive the smallest possible external support. For instance, in Kazakhstan, China offered to invest in a lucrative 3,000-kilometre gas pipeline in a bid to convince Astana to ratify the 1998 border treaty.¹⁶ The CPC's concern over the stability of China's western neighbourhood is evident. It took less than a decade for Beijing to resolve all border issues and obtain external support for quelling separatists in the XUAR. However, Afghanistan has remained little concerned by the "good-neighbour policy," the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's (SCO) membership and/or the pledges of economic investment. Chinese policy-makers perceived the CARs as more critical in this regard.

Afghanistan: A Non-Case for China to Balance its Non-Interference Policy

According to the CPC, the security of China's national interests rests on a stable and friendly international environment in which there is willing to cooperate with Beijing. To ensure a stable world order, Chinese policy-makers based their foreign policy on the Five Principles of Peace Coexistence developed by Zhou Enlai to a great extent. If non-interference was a comparative advantage, abroad it

¹³Between 300,000 and 1 million of Uyghur are believed to live in Central Asia. See: Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, "Cross-Border Minorities as Cultural and Economic Mediators between China and Central Asia," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 1, February 2009, p. 95

¹⁴According to China's leadership, more than a thousand Uighur separatists received training in Afghanistan. See: Chien-peng Chung, "China's 'War on Terror': September 11 and Uighur Separatism", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2002, available at <<http://www.cfr.org/china/chinas-war-terror-september-11-uighur-separatism/p4765>>

¹⁵"Uzbek Group In Afghanistan Pledge Allegiance To Islamic State", *RFE-RL*, 30 March 2015, available at <<http://www.rferl.org/content/uzbek-group-in-afghanistan-behead-afghan-soldier/26928658.html>>

¹⁶Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "Central Asia-China relations and their relative weight in Chinese Foreign Policy", in Marlène Laruelle, Bayram Balci (eds.), *China and India in Central Asia: A New "Great Game"?*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p.28

became an issue. According to the Beijing consensus, economic development should be achieved first and democratic changes can wait. China is appreciated for its model of development wherein they refuse interference in internal affairs as opposed to the Washington model which promoted on some occasions liberal and democratic changes in others' territories. The 'no-strings attached' approach convinced former Afghan President Hamid Karzai who in turn publicly supported China's model.

Beijing is regularly criticised for not taking responsibility in the global order even though the country benefits from stability. The mercantilist policies China holds abroad has created mistrust and backlashes that are detrimental with its own national interests. Chinese scholars are divided on the levels of responsibility Beijing should take in the world order. Since its power is expanding and it wants to be considered a major power, what role should Beijing play on the global stage?

Beijing is weighing between the need to demonstrate its international standing and the inherent fear of being overburdened if it begins to undertake and discharge global responsibilities. Chinese officials have sought to broaden their approach in order to underplay harmful impacts for the country. For instance, Beijing played a mediator role quite successfully in Sudan, after appointing a Special Envoy to Darfur. Only time will tell whether the Sudanese experience is a unique case related to China's stakes with one of its top-economic partners or an indicator of a new trend in China's foreign policy. Nevertheless, over the past few years, Xi Jinping's administration has used specific terminologies such as the concept of "peaceful development" (Zhōngguó Héping Fāzhǎn) or "win-win cooperation" - that suggest China is seriously considering changing its position within the world order. The notion of "responsible power" has been added to official statements and discourses in order to shed suspicions of free-riding. Furthermore, this evolution in thinking became manifest at the Security Council, after China endorsed resolutions based on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. Chinese leaders' interpretation of the doctrine is still restricted but demonstrates a change in their understanding of commitment to non-interference. Although actions on the ground were weak in comparison to what could be expected, there is a likelihood of Chinese officials stepping away from non-interference when their economic and strategic interests are threatened. To be specific, if Chinese policy-makers choose to step away from their non-interference policy, they will do so in their neighbourhood.

As regards Kabul, China did not intervene in the last decade mostly because the US was leading the charge there. The foreign troops' exit leaves the door open for greater involvement even if Beijing has lukewarm stakes in Afghanistan. Economically, Beijing ranks first in terms of foreign investment bids in Afghanistan, but only because of its generous US\$3.5 billion investment to mine copper in the Mes

Aynak mines – an effort that has since stalled.¹⁷ The Chinese state-owned companies are even trying to re-evaluate the Mes Aynak contract.¹⁸ Thus, at present, Chinese economic interests in Afghanistan are more distant dreams than real stakes. Strategically, Chinese borders are sufficiently impermeable to prevent infiltration of militants within Xinjiang. The Afghan turmoil certainly poses reasonable threats because of its potential to trigger instability in the region but is insufficient to urge Chinese leaders to move away from their longstanding stance.

¹⁷“Chinese halt at flagship mine imperils Afghan future”, *Reuters*, 27 September 2012, available at <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/09/27/uk-afghanistan-aynak-idUKBRE88QOXL20120927>>

¹⁸“China’s MCC turns back on US\$3b Mes-Aynak Afghanistan mine deal”, *The South China Morning Post*, 21 March 2014, available at <<http://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1453375/chinas-mcc-turns-back-us3b-mes-aynak-afghanistan-mine-deal>>

II

CHINESE INVOLVEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN: AN APPRAISAL

China in Afghanistan: Pragmatic Low Profile Policy

Over the past few decades, Beijing sat on the side-lines of the Afghan issue because Afghanistan was not sufficiently stable to welcome Chinese investments. The peril posed by a potential spill-over in the neighbourhood explains why China followed a minimal involvement policy based on two pillars: economy and diplomacy.

Chinese officials assured their support to the new Afghan government immediately after the fall of the Taliban from power in 2001. They offered, along with the international community, humanitarian aid for reconstruction¹⁹ and built infrastructure like the Jamhuriat hospital in Kabul. However, this aid has been described as limited. China's economic aid was estimated to roughly US\$250 million between 2001 and 2013, a measly amount compared to what the other regional powers contributed.²⁰ ²¹ Besides aid, Beijing invested massively in Afghanistan, particularly in the Mes Aynak copper-mine. These investments were welcomed because they had the potential to improve the economic situation. Moreover, since 2006, China has exempted Kabul from tax imports on 278 items and has deepened their economic relationship, thus becoming one of the country's primary economic partners.²² Security assistance too was provided but it focused on non-lethal aspects such as training programmes.²³ Beijing also concentrates its efforts against drug-trafficking as that is a key source of funding for militant groups, and poses a threat to public health in the region.

¹⁹Beijing promised US\$5 million in humanitarian aid. See: European Council on Foreign Relations, *Can China save Afghanistan?*, 28 September 2008, available at <http://www.ecfr.eu/article/can_china_save_afghanistan>

²⁰"Anxious China emerges as diplomatic player in Afghanistan", *Reuters*, 14 April 2014, available at <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/14/us-china-afghanistan-diplomacy-idUSBREA3D0H120140414>>

²¹India affirmed to have delivered more than US\$2 million aids to Afghanistan. See :Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *India - Afghanistan Relations*, August 2012, available at <<http://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/afghanistan-aug-2012.pdf>>

²²China represented in 2013 more than 10% of Afghanistan's total import. See: World Trade Organization, "Afghanistan", *Statistics Database*, September 2014, available at <<http://stat.wto.org/CountryProfile/WSDBCountryPFView.aspx?Language=E&Country=AF>>

²³China has trained 300 security officers since 2012. See: "China and Afghanistan sign economic and security deals", *BBC News*, 23 September 2012, available at <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-19693005>>

China also developed a restrained diplomatic approach with its neighbour. It re-opened its embassy in Kabul in 2002 but bilateral relations lacked significant depth during the 2000s.²⁴ Although former Afghan President Hamid Karzai paid two visits to Beijing in 2003 and 2006, the momentum of the Beijing-Kabul bilateral picked up mostly after Washington announced its withdrawal. In 2012, Chinese and Afghan leaders upgraded their relationship to a strategic and cooperative level, but this agreement had little value, as Kabul shared such a level of relations with a number of other countries. Primarily, this upgradation of the partnership was a pretext for China to secure its interests by specifying in the treaty that “The Afghan side reaffirmed that it is committed to the one-China policy [...], and expressed its firm support for China’s positions on the Taiwan, Tibet-related, Xinjiang-related and other major issues concerning China’s core interests.”²⁵

As part of its non-interference commitment, Beijing kept a cautious distance from Kabul’s internal affairs and stayed away from any military intervention. Chinese leaders preferred to affirm the responsibility of the international community in peace processes involving the country. For example, they sought UN support to last in Afghanistan after NATO announced its withdrawal.²⁶ The SCO has become China’s key instrument and a vehicle of its influence in the region to ensure that its basic interests are not threatened. In 2005, a SCO-Afghanistan contact group was established to favour cooperation in areas of mutual interest. However, the organisation, paralysed by its internal weaknesses, failed to carry out meaningful action. The dreadful Afghan security situation enabled the Chinese leadership to gain the neighbours’ support against three evils, “terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.” The organisation allows China to project a relatively proactive image of itself without actually having to take the lead inside Afghanistan - because, otherwise, it would be disastrous for Beijing’s policy of non-interference.

²⁴Ministry of foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, *The Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Afghanistan will officially reopen on February 6*, 29 January 2002, available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zjzg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_663354/2676_663356/2679_663362/t15840.shtml

²⁵Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Joint Declaration Between The People’s Republic of China And The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Establishing Strategic and Cooperative Partnership*, 8 June 2012, available at <http://president.gov.af/Content/Media/Documents/JointDeclaration-AFG-China-FinalJune820128620121686359553325325.pdf>

²⁶Ministry of foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, *Wang Yi: China Supports UN to Stay in Afghanistan and Play a Bigger Role*, 31 October 2014, available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zjzg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_663354/2676_663356/2678_663360/t1206534.shtml

Beyond its lukewarm stakes, there is little incentive to coerce Chinese leaders to reverse their long-standing policy of non-interference. At the same time, this pragmatic approach avoided running the risk of being targeted by terrorist movement and irritating their ally, Pakistan.

III

CHINA PLAYING MEDIATOR: UNLIKELY GAME-CHANGER

Proactive Policy on Request

Since 2014 however, Chinese officials have played an increasingly important role in Afghanistan. This prominent position allegedly resulted from Ashraf Ghani's outreach to Pakistan. The Afghan president is convinced that the "undeclared state of war [between Kabul and Islamabad] for the past 14 years²⁷" is the primary reason for instability in his country. He expects that Pakistani approval would enable his government to reach a political settlement with Taliban. Previous reconciliation attempts by the Afghan government made directly to the Taliban, proved fruitless. Ashraf Ghani and his advisors decided to favour China's mediation because it is the regional power that has the greatest influence on Pakistan. This move was also favoured by US policy-makers, who seek a reliable regional power to take charge after NATO forces withdraw from Afghanistan. Most bilateral meetings between Beijing and Washington - mostly since the beginning of the Istanbul Process - were an opportunity to urge Chinese involvement.

For instance, during the last US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, both sides "acknowledged they are important stakeholders in supporting Afghanistan."²⁸ President Ghani made significant efforts to favour China's involvement in the Pakistan-led peace process. Ghani's first foreign visit after assuming office was to China, in October 2014, during which 15 Uyghur militants from Afghan territory were extradited to please Beijing.^{29 30}

Afghan officials perceived China as a valuable third party also because it has maintained extended relations with Taliban. Beijing led an interference-free approach with Kabul and has therefore not caused a major problem for Taliban in recent years. In the past, Chinese representatives have even had direct contact with some Taliban leaders. They allegedly also sold weapons to mujahideen factions

²⁷"Afghan President: Pakistan Is Why Peace with Taliban Is Possible", *USIP Publications*, 25 March 2015, available at <<http://www.usip.org/publications/2015/03/25/afghan-president-pakistan-why-peace-taliban-possible>>

²⁸Office of the Spokesperson of the US Department of State, *U.S.-China Strategic & Economic Dialogue Outcomes of the Strategic Track*, 24 June 2015, available at <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/06/244205.htm>>

²⁹"Afghanistan's Ghani Visits China in First Official Trip", *The Voice of America*, 28 October 2014, available at <<http://www.voanews.com/content/afghanistan-ghani-visits-china-in-first-official-trip/2499173.html>>

³⁰"Afghans arrested Chinese Uyghurs to aid Taliban talks bid: officials", *Reuters*, 20 February 2015, available at <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/20/us-afghanistan-taliban-china-idUSKBN0LO18020150220>>

during the war against the Soviet Army by way of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) channel.³¹ These relations were dependent on Islamabad's consent but allowed Chinese representatives to meet former Taliban Chief Mullah Omar in person. During this meeting, they successfully ensured that Taliban-led Afghanistan did not join or support the ETIM militants' cause.³² In return, they purportedly supplied the Taliban with money and arms although there is a likelihood that ISI may have equipped them without China's approval.³³ Beijing never supported the Taliban regime but it tried to protect the regime from international sanctions as far as possible. Furthermore, over the past few years, China advocated political compromise with the Taliban as the best solution for the future of Afghanistan.³⁴ It is noteworthy that during the 2012 London Conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi affirmed the necessity of "promoting national reconciliation and making the reconciliation process more inclusive."³⁵ This mutual trust between Chinese and Taliban officials is manifest in Taliban Spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid's statement, "We have no problems with China as it has never interfered in Afghanistan. The Chinese will be safe."³⁶ Nevertheless, the militants would probably consider greater involvement from China as a misguided attempt; Chinese leaders are far from having the Pakistani level of influence over the Taliban's actions.

Beijing reacted fairly favourably to President Ghani's request. First, in October 2014, it organised the Ministerial Meeting on the Istanbul Process which was a major conference on Afghanistan. Chinese

³¹ Chinese covered support for ISI's operations in Afghanistan is also affirmed by Kinsella Warren. *Unholy Alliances*, Lester Publishing, 1992; Yitzhak Shichor, "The Great Wall of Steel: Military and strategy in Xinjiang", in Frederick Starr (eds.), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, M.E. Sharpe, 2004, p.157-158; Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2015. These authors may differ about the content of Chinese support but agree at least on its hidden occurring.

³²In December 2000, Lu Shulin the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan met Mullah Omar in order to secure Chinese interests. See: Kemel Toktomushev, "Chinese Neighbourhood Diplomacy: Afghanistan, Xinjiang and Central Asia", *China US Focus*, 14 July 2015, available at <<http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/chinese-neighbourhood-diplomacy-afghanistan-xinjiang-and-central-asia/>>

³³"Taleban 'getting Chinese arms", *BBC News*, 3 September 2007, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6975934.stm>

³⁴China tried also to prevent Taliban from international sanctions. See: "Why Is China Talking to the Taliban?", *Foreign Policy*, 21 June 2013, available at <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/06/21/why-is-china-talking-to-the-taliban/>>

³⁵Ministry of foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Remarks by H.E. Yang Jiechi Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China At the London Conference on Afghanistan*, 28 January 2010, available at <<http://wcm.fmprc.gov.cn/pub/eng/wjb/wjbz/2461/t655421.htm>>

³⁶"China's interest in Afghanistan could bode well for both countries", *The Express Tribune*, 26 July 2014, available at <<http://tribune.com.pk/story/740970/chinas-interest-in-afghanistan-could-bode-well-for-both-countries/>>

Premier Li Keqiang significantly pledged US\$250 million in aid, as well as the training of 3000 Afghan professionals (the joint statement does not specify the type and sector of the professionals).³⁷

Additionally, Beijing has expressed willingness to step up communications with Kabul. It is no coincidence that the Chinese leadership appointed Sun Yuxi, a senior diplomat familiar with the country,³⁸ as a Special Envoy to Afghanistan. China creates very few Special Envoy positions and therefore this appointment is worth noting. This mediation delivered positive signs at the beginning after the May 2015 unofficial peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government representatives took place in Urumqi.³⁹ China was even considered as a destination to hold the second round of the Murree talks, after a Chinese envoy attended the first round.

Obviously, China's proactive role in Afghanistan isn't just a response to President Ghani's request. The NATO withdrawal and the deterioration in the security situation in northern Afghanistan explain Beijing's motivations. By playing mediator, Beijing is reassuring Washington that Pakistan will not spoil the peace-process and seeks to favour a complete US withdrawal from its backyard. However, Afghan solicitation was most likely instrumental in motivating China further. China would have probably never decided to interfere in its neighbour's internal affairs unilaterally. The Chinese leadership agreed to mediate but reminded that "the agenda must be proposed by President Ashraf Ghani."⁴⁰ China agreed to mediate because it perfectly suits its framework of action, projects a positive image abroad, and adds another feather to its foreign policy cap.

Unlikely Game-Changer

Some analysts state that the Afghan government has overestimated the capacity of Chinese officials in facilitating a political settlement and that President Ghani's expectations are likely to remain underachieved. This is because firstly, Pakistan, and not Afghanistan, is China's crucial partner in South Asia. Therefore, Beijing would assuredly favour its relations with Islamabad and not Kabul. In recent

³⁷"China pledges financial, training assistance to Afghanistan", *China Daily*, 31 October 2014, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-10/31/content_18835431.htm

³⁸Sun Yuxi was former Ambassador in Afghanistan and India and worked as well with the Pakistani Embassy. See: "Sun Yuxi appointed special envoy to Afghanistan", *South China Morning Post*, 19 July 2014, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1556206/sun-yuxi-appointed-special-envoy-afghanistan>

³⁹"Taliban and Afghan Peace Officials Have Secret Talks in China", *The New York Times*, 25 May 2015, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/26/world/asia/taliban-and-afghan-peace-officials-have-secret-talks-in-china.html>

⁴⁰"Can China bring peace to Afghanistan?", *BBC News*, 1 December 2014, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30273431>

years, Chinese leaders have gradually limited their support to Pakistan. Its assistance is no longer crucial as it earlier was, when China lacked international standing. Last year when it became too hazardous, China removed six economic projects from Pakistan.⁴¹ However, Chinese officials are unlikely to let go of Pakistan, even if it behaves recklessly. They perceive Islamabad's policies with violent non-state actors negatively, but they believe the abandonment of their ally would be a greater threat. China appears eager to maintain the Pakistani government in power at high costs and has pledged massive economic support especially via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The Chinese leadership has demonstrated its leverage over Pakistan previously, for instance, when it successfully compelled Islamabad to take military action against militants who were taking refuge inside Lal Masjid.⁴² Nonetheless, Beijing's relationship with Islamabad is too crucial to be undermined, especially because for the former, the China-Afghanistan bilateral is not equally or more important than the China-Pakistan bilateral. The CPC officials will probably continue to promote the interests of their relations insofar as the impact of Pakistan's policies are bearable for Chinese interests.

Second, China does not seem to have much to offer to solve the deadlocks that the peace-talks might face. Beijing, by remaining on the side-lines of Afghanistan's internal affairs, failed to build relations with local groups not affiliated with Islamabad. For instance, the Urumqi talks were reportedly attended by the Pakistan-based Taliban - Mullah Abdul Jalil, Mullah Hassan Rahmani and Mullah Abdul Razzaq.⁴³ In case Islamabad withdraws its support from the peace process, Chinese representatives would be powerless. They do not have sufficient leverage to urge local Afghan groups to negotiate with the government. China's shortage of contact and leverage with the Taliban could be what is perceived as an advantage that projects Beijing as a neutral power. President Ghani and the Pakistani officials seem to forget that the Taliban are not the only troublemakers in Afghanistan.

A nationwide political consensus is required to give fresh impetus to the peace and reconciliation process. China could act as a guarantor to ensure that the rights and interests of all Afghan parties are ensured in the awaited political settlement. However, for now, China has shown little interest in developing policies independently of Islamabad. On the contrary, the "no-strings attached" approach

⁴¹"Nawaz wants China-Pak corridor ready by 2018", *The Express Tribune*, 28 July 2015, available at <<http://tribune.com.pk/story/927659/in-the-fast-lane-nawaz-wants-china-pak-corridor-ready-by-2018/>>

⁴²"Pakistani soldiers storm mosque", *BBC News*, 10 July 2007, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6286500.stm>

⁴³Borhan Osman, Afghanistan Analysts Network, *The Murree Process: Divisive peace talks further complicated by Mullah Omar's death*, 5 August 2015, available at <<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-murree-process-divisive-peace-talks-further-complicated-by-mullah-omars-death/>>

promoted by Chinese officials probably means that they are not interested in the content of the talks. For instance, the Taliban maintain a particularly regressive attitude towards the status and rights of women and this issue will doubtlessly be a major deadlock in the talks if and when they occur. With China playing mediator, there is unfortunately no guarantee that strides made during the last decade will be protected if a political settlement is reached.

China is most probably unlikely to be a game-changer unless it manages to make valuable investments for the local economy. With at least one-third of the Afghan population still living below the poverty-line, the need for economic development is a necessary condition to achieve stability. With 71 per cent of its national budget funded by international grants, the Afghan government is highly dependent on foreign aid, and hopes that China's economic investments might have a positive impact on the Afghan economy.⁴⁴

⁴⁴Ministry of Finance of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *National Budget Document*, 2015, p. 9, available at <http://www.budgetmof.gov.af/images/stories/DGB/BPRD/National%20Budget/1394/1394%20National%20Budget_English%20Version.pdf>

IV

PROSPECTS FOR CHINA'S INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN

China and the False Start of Peace Talks

After showing positive signs, the peace-process was interrupted after the Taliban confirmed that Mullah Omar had died in 2013. Omar was the common thread that linked the different insurgent factions, and the announcement of his death brought to fore the internal divisions in the Taliban ranks.

The level of Pakistani influence appears to be the most critical issue for the Taliban. The new leader, Mullah Mansour, is perceived with reason to be close to the ISI. To quash dissensions inside Taliban ranks, he employed high levels of tact, diplomacy and coercion albeit with the help of the ISI, as opposed to violence. However, conversely, he chose a warmongering approach to fortify the Taliban's authority and carried out bloody attacks against civilians in Kabul on 7 August.⁴⁵ After these attacks, Ghani put the "Pakistan-led" peace-process on hold since he guessed that the attacks had been planned from Pakistan. On 10 August, Ghani declared that "the decisions that Pakistani government will be making in the next few weeks will be as significant to affect bilateral relations for the next decades. [...] We can no longer tolerate to see our people bleeding in a war exported and imposed on us from outside."⁴⁶ President Ghani seems to consider Afghanistan's neighbour responsible for the failure of the peace process: he said, "We hoped for peace but we are receiving messages of war from Pakistan."⁴⁷

Kabul's main request to Pakistan is that Islamabad sincerely fight terrorist threats emanating from within its territory. In the 10 August 2015 press conference, President Ghani said "We have shared intelligence with the Pakistani side so that both could carry out a comprehensive and targeted anti-terrorism campaign to rid our nations of violence."⁴⁸

⁴⁵Three attacks took place on 7 August. The first attack in Shah Shahid district has however not been acknowledged by Taliban probably because of the high number of civilian victims. AAN Kate Clark provides an interesting analysis of the attacks and Taliban responsibility in it. See: Kate Clark, Afghanistan Analysts Network, *The Triple Attack in Kabul: A message? If so, to whom?*, 10 August 2015, available at <<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-triple-attack-in-kabul-a-message-if-so-to-whom/>>

⁴⁶Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Translation of Remarks by President Ashraf Ghani at Press Conference*, 10 August 2015, available at <<http://president.gov.af/en/news/translation-of-remarks-by-president-ashraf-ghani-at-press-conference>>

⁴⁷"Translation of Remarks by President Ashraf Ghani at Press Conference", *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid*

However, the reality is more nuanced. Pakistan has never completely controlled the Taliban and is unlikely to run the risk of losing its clout over the Taliban. Drawing the Taliban into peace talks was, in itself, a costly operation in terms of political capital for the ISI. The Pakistani-led approach demonstrates its own limits: the Murree talks were a first step, but a trusted political settlement cannot be reached under duress. Pakistan, conscious of this hazard, could seek to maintain its leverage over the Taliban and turn down Kabul's requests.

This deadlocked situation could be an opportunity for Chinese leaders to demonstrate that they care about Afghanistan. Indeed, Beijing appeared as the most credible stakeholder to help Kabul and Islamabad in finding a common ground. That is in fact the key reason Ghani sought Beijing's mediation.

However, China will never publicly direct Pakistan - especially given the importance of the Beijing-Islamabad bilateral, and Pakistan's stance that Beijing should not genuinely pressure Pakistan.

Evidently, China appears to have done little to compel Islamabad to meet Kabul's expectations of fighting terrorist threats within its territory sincerely. The Chinese leadership reacted lethargically: its ambassador met the Afghan National Security Advisor Mohammad Hanif Atmar, but merely confirmed its promise to support and equip the ANSF.⁴⁹ China seems unready to pressure its ally to the extent Afghan officials expected.

Internal divisions exacerbate the difficulties of enforcing a political settlement accepted and respected by all parties. At present, the change in the Taliban's leadership and associated upshots combined with Islamabad's unresponsiveness could have two major consequences for China. Mullah Mansour could either carry on calls for widespread violence to consolidate his leadership, or fail to ensure unity and loyalty to the Taliban among local commanders on the brink of splintering and/or seeking to join other militant groups. Both situations may lead to the expansion of militancy in the region, forcing Beijing to adopt another strategy.

As it does not have many stakes in Afghanistan, China will most likely quit its mediator role and discharge domestic policies to quell unrest. Splinter groups outside Pakistani leverage represent a more worrisome issue for the Chinese leadership. Indeed, without leverage, it will be difficult to prevent them from supporting the ETIM separatists or joining militant groups opposing Beijing.

⁴⁹"China ready to equip, support Afghan forces: envoy", *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 10 August 2015, available at <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2015/08/10/china-ready-equip-support-afghan-forces-envoy>

Given China's definition of intervention, its officials are facing a shortage of options. In case the situation worsens, China will assuredly seek to secure its interests on the domestic front by increasing control and surveillance in the XUAR. This solution is barely efficient and in fact will cause deterioration in the situation because it will intensify the Uyghurs' perception of discrimination and marginalisation. Beijing is conscious of the limits of their policy and is yet to consider it as their least problematic option.

Mid and Long Term Prospects: A Future for China's Intervention?

Chinese officials value their policy of non-intervention highly because it provides an image of reliability. Nonetheless, China's rise has led them to occasionally soften their non-interference commitment when required.

As regards Afghanistan, in the near future, China foresees the implementation of major economic projects in its neighbourhood. The OBOR has become a flagship programme for Chinese leaders and its failure might have tremendous consequences for Beijing and its international standing. The implementation of the SREB will in itself be a difficult task for Chinese leaders even if Afghanistan is stable. Central Asian resources are tempting for other regional powers as well and Moscow has always sought to keep privileged ties with its former territories that are now sovereign nations. Even if the Afghan situation does not evolve favourably, China will likely adopt a proactive position in the long-term for two reasons.

First, intervening in Afghanistan could represent a useful bargaining chip. Barring its relationship with Pakistan, China's influence in the region is rather modest and mostly based in the economic realm. Worryingly, Beijing lacks influence and soft power to convince entities of its peaceful intention. Demonstrating an interest in the stability of the region beyond narrow national security interests could be a decisive opportunity for Beijing to display that it has peaceful ambitions in the region.

In the long-term, China's policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan would be largely influenced by what Chinese leaders succeed in implementing as part of their OBOR strategy. Given the stakes, Beijing will require a long period of time and stability before it turns them into profitable businesses.⁵⁰ Afghanistan is strategically situated at the centre of China's craved corridors and will be closely monitored. If Beijing achieves in carrying out what it has pledged in Kabul's neighbourhood, Chinese leaders could be even

⁵⁰ Chinese leaders pledged \$45 billion in Pakistan for the CPEC. See: "China's landmark investments in Pakistan", *The Express Tribune*, 21 April 2015, available at <<http://tribune.com.pk/story/873627/chinas-landmark-investments-in-pakistan/>>

more bound to intervene meaningfully. China could either build greater political relations with the foreign countries affected or intervene directly to ensure security if it wants to give a chance of success to its projects. At this stage, it is complicated to evaluate what the implications of OBOR will be for the region. However, it is already certain that the more successful Beijing will be the greater role in the region it will play.

V

CONCLUSION

China's role in Afghanistan has been long-expected since the time foreign troops began exiting the country, because Beijing has unquestionable assets to provide. Chinese leaders are conscious of the threat an unstable Afghanistan poses to their interests, especially vis-à-vis militancy in the XUAR and to the implementation of the OBOR initiative. They have already embraced their role in this regard, but the expectations of Chinese involvement in Afghanistan by other foreign countries are likely to remain unmet; China usually deploys hands-off policies abroad.

In February 2015, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi offered a clear overview of what Chinese officials are prepared to do in Afghanistan.⁵¹ First, he reaffirmed China's commitment to the Afghan-led Afghan-owned process which justifies China's involvement – which is at Kabul's request. Then, he encouraged the reconciliation process between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Third, he pledged to bring economic and social reconstruction in Afghanistan and declared Beijing's dedication to integrate Kabul in a regional framework, probably within the OBOR strategy. China's involvement in Afghanistan will likely not go beyond these four aspects. Chinese officials are conscious of the limits of their policy but their key interests can be protected without extended involvement for as long as the XUAR remains stable. Yet, in case Afghanistan becomes more stable, Beijing would probably be the first to further consolidate its commitment to Kabul.

The Afghan society has considerably evolved since 2001, and Mullah Mansour's organisation is not as popular as it was. The Afghan Taliban could be challenged in the long run since the Islamic State has made its inroads into the region and new trends have appeared in the young insurgent cadres.⁵² These trends should be closely monitored in order to foresee peace in Afghanistan. Stability in Afghanistan will be the result of the national reconciliation first, not external pressure.

⁵¹Ministry of foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Wang Yi: Addressing the Issue of Afghanistan Requires Reinforced Support in Four Aspects*, 12 February 2015, available at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_663354/2676_663356/2678_663360/t1238074.shtml>

⁵²A recent paper by Borhan Osman identifies new trends in Islamic activism within the young generations. He highlights four movements which have nowadays a broad support base within Afghanistan: the Hibz-ut Tahrir, the Jamiat-e Eslah, the young branch of the Hebz-e Islami and finally the new Salafists. See: Borhan Osman, Afghanistan Analysts Network, *Beyond Jihad and Traditionalism Afghanistan's new generation of Islamic activists*, 23 June 2015, available at <<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/aan-paper-afghanistans-new-generation-of-islamic-activists/>>

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