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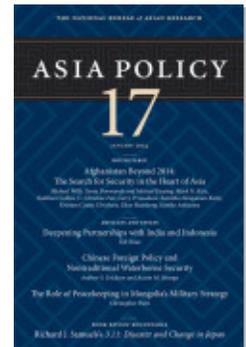
## Chinese Views of Post-2014 Afghanistan

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## Chinese Views of Post-2014 Afghanistan

*Zhao Huasheng*

As 2014 begins, the U.S. and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force is preparing to withdraw from Afghanistan. Whether one considers how China is seen by Afghanistan or how Afghanistan is seen by China, both countries' views of each other have undergone great changes since the beginning of the war in 2001.

During the past half century, China has played a secondary role in Afghanistan. From the 1950s until the 1980s, the Soviet Union was Afghanistan's largest trading partner, its greatest source of aid, and a close friend; as a result, Afghanistan was drawn into the Soviet sphere of influence. The Soviet Union had a monopoly on influence in Afghanistan until 1989, when it was compelled to withdraw its troops. Since the new outbreak of war in Afghanistan beginning in 2001, the United States has performed the role the Soviet Union once played. It has stationed large numbers of troops on Afghan soil, has played a crucial part in the Afghan government, and continues to oversee the country's security and politics. During both periods, China certainly played a role in Afghanistan's affairs, but not a particularly decisive one.

The situation today is quite different. As Afghanistan enters a period of transformation, international society, as well as the Afghan government itself, will generally expect China to assume a larger role in Afghanistan and participate more proactively. This includes providing more investment, aid, and other development assistance, as well as taking on more responsibility for the country's stability. During a visit to Beijing in September 2013, Afghan president Hamid Karzai said that he hopes China will continue to help bring about peace, security, and stability in Afghanistan, in addition to playing a constructive role in improving the relations with neighboring states.<sup>1</sup> He also expressed a desire for the two countries to strengthen their trade and cultural cooperation and a hope that China will help Afghanistan boost its capacities, develop its economy, and improve the lives of its people.

Afghanistan has also changed in the eyes of China. Previously, the country was seen solely as an external threat to security. While Afghanistan

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<sup>1</sup> Li Xiaokun, "Afghanistan Seeks Active Beijing Role," *China Daily*, September 28, 2013.

remains a contributing factor to external instability, it has become a partner that offers many potential benefits to the Chinese economy, as well as opportunities for China to further develop its influence on the periphery. China already has economic interests in Afghanistan that should not be overlooked. In 2008, for example, a Chinese company won rights to the Aynak copper mine project. In 2011, China National Petroleum Corporation signed a contract to acquire the oil fields of the northeastern provinces of Sar-i-Pul and Faryab. Both projects required China to make a huge investment. When they begin operation, the minerals, oil, and gas produced will need to be exported, requiring further investment in the construction of railroads and pipelines. Through these projects, China hopes to acquire the resources needed to sustain its economic growth and simultaneously contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan's economy by providing the country with capital, technology, and employment opportunities, as well as considerable profits and tax revenue.

Yet as China increases its investment in Afghanistan, it also must address the problem of how to protect its economic interests. The largest risk arises from instability. Chinese investors are powerless in the face of Afghanistan's political, social, and religious conflicts, and China is incapable of solving these political and security problems on its own. In the face of such challenges, Chinese investors and political leaders must work with the international community to stabilize Afghanistan and establish good relations among all the country's factions and clans. For China, this is particularly important in the areas in which Chinese companies are located. In September 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed a vision to build a "Silk Road economic zone," which has been seen as proof of China's strategy of developing its western provinces.<sup>2</sup> Due to its position as the crossroads of Central, South, and West Asia, Afghanistan has an important role in this plan.

Because of these economic and security developments, both countries are becoming increasingly important to each other. As China emerges as one of the countries with the largest influence in Afghanistan, its once straightforward interests have already become more complex. Afghanistan, for example, shares a border with the Chinese province of Xinjiang and therefore has a lasting influence on Xinjiang's periphery. Afghanistan also remains an observer state in the Shanghai Cooperation

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), "President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries," Press Release, September 7, 2013 ~ <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t1076334.shtml>.

Organisation (SCO), and the success or failure of its transformation will have an effect on the SCO.

As a result, although it has no intention of competing with other countries in Afghanistan and is not attempting to fill a power vacuum, China realizes that the current state of affairs requires it to take on more responsibility. Since 2012, China has become more active on Afghan issues in two major directions: one is the strengthening of bilateral relations; the other is consulting with neighboring countries on the situation in Afghanistan. With respect to the first direction, in June 2012, China and Afghanistan declared a strategic partnership. As Afghanistan faces a turning point and international public opinion on its state of affairs remains pessimistic, this move reflects China's firm support of the Afghan government. Soon thereafter, in September 2012, China's state councilor and security czar Zhou Yongkang became the first Chinese leader to visit Afghanistan, which was an indication of Afghanistan's growing importance to China.

At the same time, China has engaged in special consultations on the situation in Afghanistan with Pakistan, India, and Russia; in 2013, for example, two consultations were held between China and Pakistan. China further supports strengthening cooperation with Afghanistan within the framework of the SCO and wants the organization to play a larger role in the country. China is also scheduled to host the fourth Foreign Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan in Tianjin in 2014. These actions collectively show that Beijing is willing to make greater contributions to the peace and development of Afghanistan.

In the big picture, China and the United States share common goals in Afghanistan: both countries oppose terrorism, hope that Afghanistan's takeover of all administrative and security functions goes smoothly, and wish to see a stable state. The two countries also have engaged in a few concrete cooperative projects, such as the joint training of Afghan diplomats. However, this does not mean that Beijing and Washington cooperate on all issues—for example, China does not participate in U.S. military actions on Afghan soil.

U.S. goals in Afghanistan are more complex than just antiterrorism. Geopolitical interests are unquestionably also an important part of the United States' strategic decision-making. As discussed earlier, Afghanistan is situated in a very unique location between South, Central, and West Asia. The country occupies a key point in the region from which it is possible to overlook Iran, Russia, Central Asia, China, Pakistan, and India. It is thus

difficult to see why the United States would completely give up such a strategically important country if it were not compelled to do so.

Although China opposes terrorism, it did not participate in the Afghan war and did not fight against the Taliban. In contrast with the United States, China believes that the Taliban is a political faction. The Taliban has existed in Afghanistan for some time and to eliminate it through military force is impossible. Moreover, because China and Afghanistan are neighbors, no matter how chaotic the situation becomes, China cannot merely walk away, unlike the United States. Its plans for Afghanistan and the Taliban are thus long-term and based on the consideration that China will have enduring interactions with the Taliban. Ultimately, China is not opposed to the organization but is instead opposed to terrorism, separatism, and extremism.

Under these circumstances, China's primary objectives are to strengthen cooperation with Afghanistan; provide more aid and investment; play a constructive role in Afghanistan's relations with neighboring countries, particularly with Pakistan; consult and coordinate with these neighboring countries; and prepare for changes in the area. To support these objectives, China elevated its relationship with Afghanistan to the level of a strategic partnership in 2012 and initiated both a trilateral dialogue between China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and a bilateral consultation with Pakistan on the Afghanistan issue in 2012 and 2013, respectively. China's aid to Afghanistan has also increased in recent years. In 2011 and 2012, China provided \$150 million of aid, and in 2013 this figure rose to \$200 million.<sup>3</sup>

As noted above, it is beyond China's abilities to solve the problems within Afghanistan. One of the most important factors in the country's future stability is the relationship between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Another is the relationship between the factions within the government. In both cases, the core issue is the distribution of power. These are all domestic issues that neither China nor any other outside country can solve. At present, according to Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, China and other external players should be concerned with addressing three issues: "first, to ensure the smooth conduct of elections in Afghanistan and achieve a smooth transition; second, to support the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned political reconciliation process; third,

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<sup>3</sup> Embassy of the PRC in Afghanistan, "Zhong-A jingmao guanxi ji Zhongguo dui A yuanzhu" [China-Afghanistan Economic and Trade Relations and China's Aid to Afghanistan], November 10, 2013 ~ <http://af.china-embassy.org/chn/zagx/ztgk/t1097560.htm>.

to support the United Nations to play an important role in coordinating international efforts on assistance to Afghanistan.”<sup>4</sup>

Future policies, however, must adjust to shifting circumstances. Significant changes are expected with the upcoming post-2014 transition in Afghanistan, although it is still unclear precisely what kinds of changes will occur. Because the fact that China and Afghanistan are neighbors will not change, it is extremely important for China to safeguard its security by maintaining non-hostile relations with all the major Afghan factions. Beijing does not want to make any enemies in Afghanistan and therefore will be careful not to directly intervene in its domestic affairs, particularly militarily. Although the challenge is great, China hopes that the post-2014 transition will open the door to a successful solution to the Afghanistan problem. As this process unfolds, China will have a new role to play, one that is more significant and multifunctional than before. ◆

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, “Wang Yi: Three Issues Should Be Properly Handled to Address the Afghan Situation,” November 11, 2013 ~> <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t1098115.shtml>.