

# A BRI(DGE) TOO FAR: THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE AND LIMITATIONS OF CHINA'S INVOLVEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China's focus on and presence in Afghanistan has grown significantly over the past decade. However, the original emphasis on economic relations has been eclipsed by China's security agenda in Afghanistan, as China seeks to ensure that anti-Chinese militancy does not leak out from Afghanistan and that Uighur militants do not receive support from the Taliban. While China does seek a stable Afghanistan and would prefer a government not dominated by the Taliban, it has made its peace with the group under the assumptions that the United States and the Afghan government will not be able to resolutely defeat it and that the Taliban will either control substantial Afghan territory or formally come to power. Much to the disappointment of the Afghan government, China has not chosen to pressure Pakistan to sever its long-standing support for the Taliban. China's economic investments in Afghanistan also remain significantly below potential due to intensifying insecurity and persisting corruption in the country and the diminishment of China's economic focus.

Increasingly, China also views Afghanistan through a geopolitical competition perspective, particularly with respect to India. As the United States reduces its role in Afghanistan, possibly down to zero U.S. military forces, China's role in the country may rise — a development which is unlikely to advance U.S. interests, and may hamper them. While China cannot easily negate U.S. counterterrorism objectives in Afghanistan and the region, it also cannot be relied upon to help the U.S. to prosecute them. Moreover, China may hamper some of the other U.S. interests in Afghanistan — specifically,

pluralistic political and economic processes, and human rights and women's rights. A reduction of U.S. presence in Afghanistan will limit the U.S. capacity to promote these interests, but even without a military presence, the United States can seek to prosecute them through diplomatic and political leverage.

However, competition with China has not been and should not be the basis of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan.

## INTRODUCTION

The past decade featured a significant growth in China's presence in Afghanistan, but also a dramatic reversal of China's priorities. Ten years ago, economic interests dominated China's agenda in Afghanistan, as China began a careful engagement in a country where its presence had been minimal. But in the last three years, Beijing gave priority to its security agenda in Afghanistan and the neighboring Chinese territory of Xinjiang — in particular, the elimination of Uighur militancy and mobilization in Xinjiang, which involves making sure that the Uighurs receive no assistance from abroad. As this paper — based on years of interviews with Chinese government officials and experts and Afghan and U.S. government officials in China, Afghanistan, and Washington, DC — shows, this has included China's development of strong relations with the Taliban — to the dismay of the Afghan government, which had fervently hoped that Beijing would instead pressure Pakistan to sever its relations with the militant group.

Instead, both the Taliban and Pakistan managed to persuade Beijing that they would further China's interest in ensuring that no support for Uighur

militants and activists in Xinjiang came from either Afghanistan or Pakistan, and that this was consonant with prosecuting their own objectives: for the Taliban, to militarily weaken the Afghan government and formally come to power in some form, and for Pakistan, to continue supporting its long-standing Taliban ally which it sees as the best mechanism to ensure its anti-Indian and other interests in Afghanistan. While China does seek a stable Afghanistan and would prefer a government not dominated by the Taliban, it has made its peace with the group under the assumptions that the United States and the Afghan government will not be able to resolutely defeat it, even if the United States does not withdraw militarily by summer 2021, and that it is likely that the Taliban will either control substantial Afghan territory or even formally come to power.

China's economic investments in Afghanistan have also remained far lower than the Afghan government and international community have hoped, with Afghanistan remaining at best tangential to China's economic and infrastructure efforts under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While the Afghan government has invested intensively in its relationship with China, and is unable to risk openly opposing this powerful neighbor, it has become strongly disappointed by China for Beijing's relations with the Taliban, relations with Pakistan, and still-meager efforts in supporting Afghanistan's economic development.

As the United States reduces its role in Afghanistan, possibly down to zero U.S. military forces, China's role in the country may rise — a development which is unlikely to advance U.S. interests, and may hamper them. However, competition with China has not been and should not be the basis of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan.

## U.S. INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Although this policy paper focuses on China's role in Afghanistan, as the United States has been the dominant outside actor in Afghanistan over the past two decades — a reality which has structured China's policies, including abstention from significant engagement there between 2001 and 2010 — it is useful to briefly lay out what U.S. interests and strategy in Afghanistan have been.

After the September 11 attacks, the United States unleashed its military might in Afghanistan with the primary goal of preventing another terrorist attack from Afghan territory on the U.S. homeland and U.S. assets. Because the Taliban had provided safe havens for al-Qaida and bases for planning and preparing the attacks, the U.S. also sought to destroy the Taliban regime and movement. Those counterterrorism interests have dominated the U.S. agenda in Afghanistan since 2001, even as U.S. policy oscillated between a narrow prosecution of this interest via military counterterrorism and a more capacious understanding of what was required — namely, a stable, ideally pluralistic, inclusive, and accountable, government in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Thus, and consistent with its values, the United States also pursued the secondary and tertiary interests of promoting democracy, rule of law, women's rights, human rights, counternarcotics objectives, and broad humanitarian interests as well as socioeconomic development.



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If the ideal vision of an economically and democratically thriving Afghanistan capable of suppressing internal militancy could not be achieved, the advancement of U.S. counterterrorism objectives has at minimum required a government in Kabul that is not hostile to the United States and/or the presence of U.S. counterterrorism proxies in the form of militias. In that case, the United States would also seek to minimize the loss of credibility resulting from a failure of its objectives in Afghanistan. Going forward, prosecuting U.S. interests even under a diminished and normalized U.S. presence also requires that a hegemony-seeking power does not prevent the United States from operating in Afghanistan.

These interests in what happens within Afghanistan are closely related to the key U.S. interest in South Asia of preventing nuclear war between Pakistan and India and preventing nuclear terrorism as a result of Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of a terrorist group. Clearly, the biggest sources of Pakistan's instability come from within the country itself and its government has cracked down on domestic militancy. But developments in Afghanistan could exacerbate Pakistan's instability if Afghanistan were to provide safe havens for potent anti-Pakistan terrorist groups. Likewise, an intensification of the use of Afghan proxies by India and Pakistan to prosecute their strategic rivalry could conceivably escalate into a broader escalation between the two nuclear powers. While the probability of Afghanistan playing a significant role in such dangerous developments is low, the consequences of either scenario could be so catastrophic that that U.S. policymakers have consistently articulated South Asia's nuclear stability as a top U.S. interest in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

For a decade and half, the United States sought to ensure those interests by militarily defeating the Taliban while building up Afghanistan's government institutions and security forces. When the goal of resolutely defeating the Taliban became distant and elusive, the Obama administration, and subsequently the Trump administration, sought to negotiate a deal with the Taliban.

## CHINA'S COUNTERTERRORISM AND SECURITY INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Enter China. As in the case of the United States, China's interests in Afghanistan have come to be dominated by the security agenda — though for China, that was a switch from putting economic objectives first. Specifically, China's security and counterterrorism interests in Afghanistan have come to be dominated by Beijing's objective of preventing Uighur militancy but also include assuring safety for its BRI investments in Central Asia and Pakistan, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

### *Uighurs*

Beijing's primary security interests in the broader Central Asia-Afghanistan-Pakistan region have come to center on preventing any support for Uighur militancy and any increased Islamization and mobilization of the Chinese Uighur community. The majority of Uighurs are Sunni Muslims with ethno-linguistic affinity with the populations of Central Asia who have long resented subjugation to Chinese Han rule.<sup>3</sup> In China's Xinjiang province, Beijing has resorted to brutal mass detentions and forced cultural re-education of the Uighur community in concentration camps<sup>4</sup> that some have described as "cultural genocide."<sup>5</sup>

Abroad, Beijing seeks to assure that neighboring states do not give any spiritual succor, political defense, or material support to the Uighur community and its militant segment. China has injected this anti-Uighur thrust into its "Good Neighbors Policy" agreements with Central Asian countries and, under the broad rubric of counterterrorism, into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's program for combatting the "three evil forces" of terrorism, ethno-nationalist separatism, and religious extremism.<sup>6</sup> Beijing's fears of Uighur militancy have only grown as Uighur terrorists have reportedly been seeking to return from Syria where they went to join the Islamic State group.<sup>7</sup>

In Afghanistan, China wants to ensure that Uighur militants — such as those belonging to Turkistan Islamic Movement (TIM), formerly known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which has conducted terrorist attacks in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China — will not find safe havens and opportunities for fundraising. During the Taliban's rule in Kabul from 1996 to 2001, some Uighur militants did find shelter and mobilized in Afghanistan. Over the past five years, some Uighur militants relocated from their previous safe havens in Pakistan into Afghanistan's Badakhshan province, which shares a short border with China.<sup>8</sup> China wants to ensure that the Uighur camps and fighters in Afghanistan are targeted and destroyed.



## **China and the Taliban**

Instead of directly participating in anti-Taliban counterinsurgency operations, China has adopted a hedging strategy. As discussed below, it has lately come to offer military training assistance to the government of Afghanistan. Before that, however, when it became clear that the U.S. military surge in Afghanistan in 2010 would not defeat the Taliban, China began engaging with the group to ensure that Afghan militants do not cooperate with their Uighur counterparts. Over the past five years, Beijing has brought and feted numerous Taliban delegations to China to improve and deepen relations with the group, including the group's deputy leader Abdul Ghani Baradar in June 2019.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, China relied on its close relationship with Pakistan and Pakistani supporters of the Taliban, such as the late Maulana Sami ul Haq, a Pakistani religious scholar and senator known as “the Father of the Taliban.” Beijing also frequently bypassed the Afghan government, with Afghan officials expressing frustration at the frequency of these meetings and the unwillingness of the Chinese government to brief them on the discussions.<sup>10</sup>

China was also instrumental in hosting Taliban delegations for early contacts with international negotiators exploring a peace deal in Afghanistan as well as hosting some of the meetings of the so-called Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process seeking to create a benevolent regional environment for Afghanistan. In 2016, China joined the Quadrilateral Coordination Group with the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, which sought to discuss how to halt the Taliban's battlefield progress, ensure regional support for a stable Afghanistan, and put life into negotiations with the Taliban. It had previously engaged in a separate trilateral dialogue with Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This embrace of the Taliban is a reversal of China's attitudes toward the group in the 1990s when China mostly supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance along with India, Russia, Iran, and the United States, even though that policy put it at odds with its ally Pakistan. However, the first attempt at rapprochement between China and the Taliban goes back to 1999. In December 2000, China's ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, even met the Taliban's leader Mullah Omar in Kandahar.<sup>11</sup> It is believed that Mullah Omar

had already assured the Chinese delegation that the Taliban regime would not host anti-Chinese militants in Afghanistan. But although Uighur militants could not operate independently, the Taliban appeared to allow them to join the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Beijing refused to join United Nations Security Council sanctions against the Taliban in 2000, but it did not veto the sanctions or recognize the Taliban regime.<sup>12</sup>

The recent, post-2014, courtship of the Taliban by China has emanated from its belief that the United States would not be able to defeat the Taliban and prevail in its counterinsurgency effort and that the Afghan government and its military forces were too unstable and weak to crush the Taliban militarily even with foreign assistance.<sup>13</sup>



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To some extent, the courting of the Taliban has clearly paid off: Like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the Taliban has been deafeningly silent about the Chinese brutalization of its fellow Sunnis in Xinjiang. Reportedly, Taliban officials have promised China they will not shelter Uighur militants.<sup>14</sup> Yet government officials and military officers report that Uighur militants continue to operate in Afghanistan, particular in Badakhshan — whether as members of the Islamic State group's regional branch, whom the Taliban has aggressively and with determination fought, or as local Taliban units.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, China is very concerned that the Islamic State has attracted Uighur militants in Badakhshan — a key reason for its outreach to the Taliban.<sup>16</sup> But the latter, i.e., Uighur Taliban units, which Afghan provincial government officials allege, would be a development directly contrary to China's objectives and strategy in Afghanistan of courting the Taliban to obtain assurances that the Taliban would respect China's counterterrorism goals.

### ***China and the U.S.-Taliban deal***

Ultimately, as the United States seeks military disengagement from its 19-year-old war in Afghanistan and the slowly deteriorating military stalemate there, the United States has sought to prosecute at least to some extent its counterterrorism interests through a deal with the Taliban.

During the Trump administration's negotiations between the United States and the Taliban led by U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, China took a backseat despite its earlier far more active role in encouraging negotiations with the Taliban. Khalilzad briefed Beijing regularly — in fact, far more frequently than NATO allies who complained of being left out and considered less important than China.<sup>17</sup> But Beijing did not seek to shape the deal substantially. Nor did it seek to subvert the negotiated deal as Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government hoped and requested of India.<sup>18</sup> Instead, at U.S. request, in October 2019, China sought to resurrect the deal that Khalilzad negotiated in August 2019 but President Trump at the last minute took off the table. Moreover, China did so by working directly through former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and other Afghan powerbrokers, outraging the Ghani government that felt slighted and disregarded.<sup>19</sup> This was yet another demonstration of how China has diversified the scope of its interlocutors in Afghanistan over the past decade, while nominally espousing non-interference in other countries' affairs and working solely through their official governments.

Officially, China has welcomed the deal the United States ultimately signed with the Taliban on February 29, 2020. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian declared “[w]e think it is important to the political settlement of the Afghan issue.”<sup>20</sup> But he also urged that “foreign troops in Afghanistan should withdraw in an orderly and responsible manner to ensure a smooth transition and avoid a security vacuum especially to prevent the terrorist groups from growing stronger in Afghanistan.”<sup>21</sup> The U.S.-Taliban deal commits the United States to withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan by July 2021 and the Taliban to refrain from attacking the United States and its allies or allowing other terrorist groups to use the territory the Taliban controls for such purposes.

But although the Taliban also promised to start negotiating with the Afghan government, those negotiations have not yet started. Nor has the Taliban agreed to a ceasefire in Afghanistan while the negotiations, easily lasting years, are taking place.<sup>22</sup> Instead, it continues to militarily pound the Afghan security forces. This possibly lengthy delay in the intra-Afghan talks is of grave concern to China. Beijing has continued to urge both the Taliban and the Afghan government “to start inter-Afghan talks as soon as possible to discuss political and security arrangements acceptable to all and make joint efforts for lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan.”<sup>23</sup>



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Like Russia and Iran (the Taliban's enemies during the 1990s), China has made its peace with the Taliban and is fully prepared to live with the group in power. But it does not want to see a civil war in Afghanistan, certainly not a protracted one. It would also prefer a government and political regime in Afghanistan not exclusively dominated by the Taliban and ideally composed of multiple Afghan factions, including key political actors in the current Afghan government.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, while China can induce the Taliban to participate in some talks, it is unlikely to be able to sway the Taliban to participate in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government. The Taliban will do so when it assesses its military power and battlefield progress to be at maximum or it may proceed with attempting to negotiate separate deals with powerbrokers across the country, steadily reducing the political influence of the government in Kabul.

### *China's military presence in Afghanistan*

In advancing its preferences in Afghanistan over the past two decades, China long avoided any kind of direct military involvement. However, like other countries in the region, such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Beijing has started to develop military-to-military relations with Kabul.<sup>25</sup> For the past several years, it has provided very limited military support to the Afghan military,<sup>26</sup> a paltry effort in comparison with U.S. and NATO training efforts. In March 2016, China pledged \$70 million (in comparison, U.S. military support to Afghanistan has been at least \$4 billion annually over the past decade) to support the Afghan government's counterterrorism efforts in the form of military equipment and training.<sup>27</sup>

More significantly, China has sought to expand its military presence in Afghanistan by stationing Chinese troops in Badakhshan province's Wakhan Corridor, the sliver of land that stretches to the Chinese border. Although China has officially denied it,<sup>28</sup> former Afghan government officials state that China sought to build a military base there and deploy a People's Liberation Army brigade, in addition to offering to send mentors and trainers for Afghan security forces during the Ghani administration.<sup>29</sup> But when the Afghan government requested Russian helicopters, China refused and instead pushed Chinese helicopters and drones. China also insisted on deploying Chinese internet and navigation systems that rival the American-built Global Position System (GPS).<sup>30</sup> However, fearing that the Chinese systems would be used to spy on Afghanistan and its international allies, including the United States, the Afghan government balked, and the talks about the base, Chinese deployment, mentors, and equipment froze — much to China's displeasure.<sup>31</sup> Instead, some Chinese troops have been stationed in Tajikistan across the border from the Wakhan Corridor.<sup>32</sup>

China has similarly used its influence, augmented through its signature strategic effort, the Belt and Road Initiative, to foist such intelligence, navigation, and military equipment onto Pakistan — despite its public declarations that BRI is a solely economic project.<sup>33</sup> Yet in what the Afghan government interpreted as retaliation for its refusal to accept China's military entreaties, China started currying favor with local officials and rival powerbrokers in Badakhshan, handing out radios, terrain vehicles, and other equipment to them — as well as to the Taliban.<sup>34</sup>

### *The BRI and Afghanistan-Pakistan relations*

During the past eight years, the relationship between the Afghan government and China have grown complicated in other ways, significantly disappointing successive Afghan administrations. Both Presidents Karzai and Ghani sought to court China and increase its involvement in Afghanistan. Signing the China-Afghanistan Strategic and Cooperative Partnership in March 2010, Karzai hoped that a newly-strengthened relationship with China would offset his deteriorating relationship with the United States and act as counterweight to U.S. pressure.<sup>35</sup> Despite a more robust China-Afghanistan relationship, that hope never really materialized. Instead, unable to seek a third term as he hoped, Karzai had to console himself with heading to China to spend several months there after leaving office.

Ghani came into office in 2014 with even greater hopes of building up Afghanistan's relationship with China and made Beijing one of his earliest trips abroad. He sought to achieve two objectives: 1) to finally find a way to get Pakistan to sever its ties with the Taliban and 2) to dramatically increase China's economic investment in Afghanistan to offset the massive losses to the fragile underdeveloped Afghan economy resulting from the reduction in U.S. and NATO forces in 2014.<sup>36</sup> Neither hope materialized.

China's Belt and Road Initiative today amounts to a \$1 trillion chain of infrastructure development projects (or their promise) in 70 countries. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was one of its initial projects. Originally announced in 2013 at \$46 billion, but having grown in its vision (if not its reality) to \$62 billion of Chinese loans and investments as of 2017,<sup>37</sup> CPEC promises to build up Pakistan's western port of Gwadar (likely for China's military ambitions and power projection, not just economic logistical access) and a new 2,000-mile network of highways and rails through Pakistan's Baluchistan province, as well as roads and infrastructure projects elsewhere.

The investments produced great hope in the Afghan and U.S. governments that China would finally induce Pakistan to stop supporting the Taliban, including its Haqqani network branch which has conducted the most brutal terrorist attacks in Kabul, with military and

logistical aid. For a decade and a half after September 11, 2001, the United States failed to cajole, persuade, browbeat, bribe, and threaten Pakistan to do so, since Pakistan's military-intelligence establishment continued to regard the relationship with the Taliban as important.<sup>38</sup> Thus, from the announcement of CPEC until about 2018, both Afghan and U.S. government officials assessed the hoped-for possibility that China would take on the role of inducing Pakistan to sever its support for the Taliban. They engaged in significant diplomatic outreach to China to persuade it to adopt that objective.<sup>39</sup> But that hope never materialized because Beijing chose not to seek to alter Pakistan's calculus, definition of interests, and strategies in Afghanistan.

Pakistan and Afghanistan have had a difficult relationship for decades, pervaded by disagreements over their border, Pashtun irredentism, Pakistani disruption in Afghan affairs, and geopolitical rivalries. Pakistan has cultivated radical militant Afghan groups as proxies in Afghanistan<sup>40</sup> and has bet, correctly as it turns out, that the Taliban would reclaim significant power in the country. Thus, Islamabad does not want to alienate the group. After all, the Taliban is Pakistan's only — however reluctant and unhappy — ally among Afghanistan's political actors. Pakistan fears an unstable Afghanistan that becomes a safe haven for anti-Pakistan militant groups. It further fears that its targeting of Afghanistan-oriented militant groups in its border regions such as Khyber-Pakhtunkwa province could provoke blowback, potentially beyond its border regions.

Crucially, Pakistan is also afraid of a strong Afghan government closely aligned with India. Whether or not Pakistan still conceives of Afghanistan as a place of strategic depth in case of an Indian military push into Pakistan, or is merely loath to find itself encircled by an Afghanistan-India alliance, it has embraced the Taliban as a strategic tool and refused to yield to U.S. pressure to go after the Taliban's sanctuaries in Pakistan, to stop funding and supporting the group, and prevent the Taliban's attacks in Afghanistan.



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Yet despite the rollout of CPEC and China's increasing focus on counterterrorism issues in its neighborhood, China did not become the cudgel or magic wand over Pakistan that Ghani and others hoped. Instead, Pakistan managed to persuade China that it could prevent any leakage of terrorism from Pakistan to China and neutralize any terrorist groups that threaten China or provide support to Uighur militancy.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, although China worked with and through Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, contributing to the pressure on Pakistan to release the Taliban deputy leader Abdul Ghani Baradar from a Pakistani prison so as to get the negotiations going, it never put the pressure on Pakistan that Afghanistan sought. Instead, much to their bitter disappointment, Ghani and other top-level Afghan officials were told point blank by their Chinese counterparts that Pakistan remains China's primary partner in the neighborhood and that Beijing would not squeeze Pakistan the way Afghanistan and the United States have sought on either Afghan militancy or Pakistan's boycott of Afghan cargo heading to India through its territory.<sup>42</sup>



## CHINA'S ECONOMIC AND COUNTERNARCOTICS INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan has also not been robustly included in the Belt and Road Initiative in the way that its government has hoped. While China signed a BRI agreement with Afghanistan in 2016 that promised to fund \$100 million worth of projects in the country, no concrete BRI investments have materialized.<sup>43</sup> China has not specified exactly how Afghanistan would be incorporated into the Belt and Road Initiative,<sup>44</sup> despite recent talks of a “dream project” railroad from China to Pakistan through Central Asia and Afghanistan. Such a project would dovetail well with the Afghan and U.S. vision of that Afghanistan eventually becoming a hub of regional transportation, trade, and energy activities. Being the economic fulcrum of such a “New Silk Road” would help generate badly needed income for the desperately poor country and create revenues for the Afghan government to break its decades-long dependency on foreign aid for basic functionality and stability. But so far, that project remains a dream.

Overall, China's economic investments in Afghanistan remain small and well below their potential. In 2017, out of its \$879 million worth of exports, Afghanistan exported a meager \$2.86 million of goods to China, a number that has not grown substantially since and is well below Afghanistan's \$411 million exports to India.<sup>45</sup> China, meanwhile, exported \$532 million to Afghanistan that year.<sup>46</sup> In 2014, China pledged \$327 million in aid to Afghanistan through 2017, an amount that surpassed its total between 2002 and 2014,<sup>47</sup> but still remained well below U.S. aid contributions. U.S. assistance has ranged from \$500 million (in 2020) to over \$1 billion per year in terms of civilian aid and over \$4 billion per year in terms of military assistance.<sup>48</sup>

China's resource extraction in Afghanistan has remained woefully limited. In theory, Afghanistan contains some \$1 trillion worth of minerals, rare metals, oil, gas, precious stones, and other extractable resources. But developing them and bringing income to one of the world's most impoverished countries has been hampered by persistent intense insecurity and out-of-control corruption.

Among the first and few auctions carried out have been a bid for a large copper mine in Mes Aynak in Logar province. In May 2008, the Chinese Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) / Jiangxi Copper Company Limited (JCL) consortium won a 30-year lease for \$3.4 billion to extract the copper and generated revenues for the Afghan government. More than 10 years later, the development of the mine, considered the second largest copper deposit in the world and estimated to contain some 450 metric tons of ore valued at least \$50 billion, has barely scratched the surface. Much to the frustration of the Afghan government, the mine lies idle, registering no development and producing little revenue for the Afghan government. Nor has the consortium begun building the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan railroad it promised as part of its bid. Instead, with the backing of the Chinese government, the consortium has sought to revise the contract. The Afghan government has contemplated taking the consortium to court, but has backed away, fearing a souring of its relations with China.<sup>49</sup>

In December 2011, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) similarly won a \$400 million bid to drill for 25 years three oil fields lying in the Afghan provinces of Faryab and Sar-i-Pul and estimated to hold no more than 87 million barrels of oil, a small amount compared to oil fields in Iran.<sup>50</sup> But once again, close to no extraction has taken place. Privately, Chinese government officials and experts on Afghanistan have confessed that China sought those bids simply to preempt other countries from gaining the concessions, while expecting full well it would not start developing its concessions for years to come due to insecurity and the corruption of the Afghan government.<sup>51</sup> But such a failure to deliver on economic enticements and promises, often obtained through the use of initial bribes and significant pressure from the Chinese embassy, have also been a feature of Chinese economic activities elsewhere in Central Asia.<sup>52</sup>

Given the Afghan government's frustrations with China's failure to deliver on its economic promises and reflecting also the intensifying and increasingly hostile Sino-American rivalry, Washington has been criticizing Beijing's paucity of economic investments in Afghanistan as well as its “bribe-fueled debt trap” in Pakistan and elsewhere.<sup>53</sup> In late 2019, even as China cooperated with U.S. efforts to negotiate with



the Taliban, U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Alice Wells delivered blazing criticism of China's economic undertakings in the region in her September 19, 2019 congressional testimony, stating bluntly that "China has not contributed to the economic development of Afghanistan" and that "the Belt and Road is just a slogan."<sup>54</sup> In a November 2019 speech, she reinforced her criticism, maintaining "I haven't seen China take the steps that would make it a real contributor to Afghanistan's stabilization, much less stitching it back into Central Asia and the international community."<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, although Chinese companies have mostly failed to develop their existing projects in Afghanistan, the little activity that has taken place bodes ill for the interests of local communities and their rights and economic and human capital development. The Mes Aynak mine project, for example, has run into issues of how to protect a local archeological site and local communities from forced uncompensated displacement and the degradation of lands needed for subsistence. To deal with the problems, an ombudsman was appointed by the Afghan government a decade ago to channel the grievances of the local community and negotiate with MCC/JCL on their behalf. When questioned about his efforts on behalf of local Afghan communities and the progressive decrease in the communities' complaints against the mine, he reportedly explained that with the knowledge and backing of Chinese representatives at the mine, he would use a three-tier threat system to prevent local people from voicing their discontent:<sup>56</sup> The first warning threatened local people with arrests by Afghan local officials perceived to have been coopted by China, and the second with the U.S. bombing of the complainers' houses (a threat on which he could not deliver). If both failed, he threatened the local people that "the Chinese would eat their donkeys," animals vital for the daily livelihoods of the local population and a credible threat since a massive global (and sometimes illegal) trade in donkey meat and skin to China from Asia and Africa took off at that time.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, at provincial and district levels in Afghanistan, China has sought to cultivate Afghan politicians and local powerbrokers often without regard for local communities' interests. These efforts to curry or browbeat local Afghan government officials into

carrying out China's preferred policies has also frustrated the national Afghan government, which has repeatedly sought to reign in such Chinese activities.<sup>58</sup>

However, the lack of extraction at Mes Aynak is not structurally determined by either a non-permissive security situation or tensions with local communities. Through its Afghan representatives, several years ago, China managed to muscle local communities into permitting extraction at Mes Aynak, despite concerns over displacement and adverse effects on local livelihoods and housing. And while security there is not optimal, it is not prohibitive. Rather, China's interest in putting resources and effort into extraction at Mes Aynak and in Afghanistan overall has declined. As a former Chinese government official put it, "Crucially, China wanted to make sure that no one else would get these concessions and that it would preempt anyone else securing the bids. But that doesn't mean that we expected to extract rapidly."<sup>59</sup> Afghan government officials, however, awarded the contract to China under the assumption that China would start significant extraction operations rapidly and the Afghan government would rapidly obtain revenues.<sup>60</sup>

Over the past two decades, China has also repeatedly raised the issue of Afghanistan's extraordinarily large opium poppy cultivation.<sup>61</sup> Like Russia, China has sought to blame the United States for Afghanistan's failure to reduce the poppy cultivation and heroin production.<sup>62</sup> However, while China has been keenly focused on suppressing the rise of illegal drug use in China<sup>63</sup> and has positioned itself as a new drug policeman in Asia,<sup>64</sup> both the heroin and methamphetamines consumed in China are predominantly supplied from Myanmar. In Afghanistan, China has thus not invested substantially in either counternarcotics law enforcement approaches or alternative livelihoods efforts to build legal replacement economies to which farmers would switch from poppy cultivation.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, like Russia, China has engaged in limited counternarcotics cooperation with the U.S. in Afghan heroin interdiction outside of Afghanistan's borders.

## GEOSTRATEGIC RIVALRIES

Increasingly, Afghanistan also features in China's geostrategic rivalries — as it does in the strategies of other countries. Although Beijing has cooperated

with the United States in the outreach to the Taliban and fears that hasty U.S. withdrawal may prevent an intra-Afghan deal, it has long been concerned about the size of U.S. military presence on its doorstep. Between 2002 and 2019, China repeatedly sought Washington's assurances that its military presence in Afghanistan would be only temporary.<sup>66</sup>



**Beijing seeks to strengthen its position as the dominant economic actor in Central Asia, while also augmenting its capabilities for military power projection.**

In what some have dubbed the “New Great Game,” China has sought to constrain U.S. efforts on its western borders, including Afghanistan and Central Asia.<sup>67</sup> Beijing seeks to strengthen its position as the dominant economic actor in Central Asia, while also augmenting its capabilities for military power projection — both objectives clashing with Russia's vision of the former Soviet republics as part of its sphere of influence. Even as both Russia and China agree that the Islamic State group is the greatest threat in Afghanistan, with the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the China-Russia rivalry is also likely to grow there. Russia has cultivated a long list of powerbrokers and proxy militias beyond the Taliban as tools in any future civil war in the country — assets that China mostly lacks.

China and Russia's focus also inadvertently created a delusion among top Afghan government officials and politicians that the United States would be locked into the New Great Game and never militarily leave Afghanistan, no matter what the U.S. statements and threats have been. This strategic delusion has only further stimulated the politicians' constant deleterious politicking, destabilizing brinkmanship, and rapacious attitude toward the Afghan state at the expense of good and essential governance in Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup>

In fact, the opposite is under way — the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is likely heading to zero in 2021 and U.S. indirect military assistance (financial and training) and other economic assistance to the

government of Afghanistan are also likely to be reduced. Such reduction of U.S. military and economic presence may increase China's influence in Afghanistan, but preventing such a change in relative power between the two countries there is not a valid reason for the United States to remain. If the United States withdraws its military presence from Afghanistan, it can continue to prosecute its counterterrorism interests from off-shore platforms (à la the Clinton-era missile strikes to hit al-Qaida camps in Afghanistan), through proxy militias in Afghanistan, or essentially homeland defense. The government of China currently has no capacity to prevent U.S. cultivation of militias in Afghanistan, nor does it have any proxy forces of its own there.

Conceivably, the United States could also seek Pakistan's permission to stage counterterrorism assets, such as drones, in Pakistan even though the U.S. does not have a military base there. China has not sought to prevent Pakistan from collaborating with U.S. counterterrorism interests — although Pakistan's counterterrorism collaboration with the United States has been lukewarm, inconsistent, and deeply deficient for Pakistan's own reasons and limitations — and relations between Beijing and Washington would have to deteriorate further than even the current low point for China to attempt to prevent such cooperation. Although counterterrorism cooperation with the United States remains a conflicted subject for Pakistan and Pakistan may oppose U.S. attacks against the Taliban from Pakistan's territory, Pakistan may not object to U.S. attacks into Afghanistan against al-Qaida or the Islamic State in Khorasan from Pakistan.<sup>69</sup> And while its counterterrorism collaboration with the United States is deficient, Pakistan retains a strong interest in cultivating relations with both Washington and Beijing and not having to choose among them.

However, while China cannot easily negate U.S. counterterrorism objectives in Afghanistan and the region, it also cannot be relied upon to help the U.S. prosecute its interests. China may well focus its influence with the Taliban and the Afghan government solely on the groups that threaten China itself, such as Uighur militants.

China may, however, hamper some of the other U.S. interests in Afghanistan — specifically, pluralistic political and economic processes, and human rights

and women's rights. A reduction of U.S. presence in Afghanistan will limit the U.S. capacity to promote these interests, but even without military presence, the United States may seek to prosecute them through diplomatic and political leverage — with the Taliban which will continue to look to the United States for economic aid, the Afghan government and military, and political powerbrokers. Whereas the United States can and should shape the behavior of all actors in Afghanistan as much as possible toward the least loss of pluralistic processes, human rights, and women's rights, China is unlikely to be interested in advancing these objectives. It may actively embrace unnecessarily harsh authoritarianism in Afghanistan — whether through a military coup d'état or an intensely doctrinaire Taliban government — which the United States should seek to prevent. The United States may not be able to prevent a Taliban government, but it has diplomatic and economic suasion power to shape to some extent the behavior of such a government. The Taliban certainly does not want to see the loss of U.S. economic aid — thus Taliban representatives consistently maintain that the Taliban wants to have friendly relations with China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States after U.S. soldiers depart and the Taliban comes to power. And they whisper to U.S. interlocutors: “No one can replace the United States economically and otherwise in Afghanistan. Not Iran, not the Saudis, not China. We know that. We want your aid to stay.”<sup>70</sup> That gives the U.S. leverage over Taliban behavior and Washington should use it to minimize losses to its secondary and tertiary interests as well as to promote its primary counterterrorism and nuclear stability interests. The United States should thus oppose any future (and currently not manifested) effort by China to define Afghanistan as in its sphere of influence and to exclude the United States from engagement in Afghanistan.

Increasingly, China has come to see India as a rival in Afghanistan, a development part and parcel of India's strategic competition with China and U.S. efforts to strengthen its own strategic rapprochement with India. India's economic assistance to and activities in Afghanistan, including in trade, infrastructure, energy, transportation, agriculture, communications, education, health care, and science and technology, have dwarfed China's. A consortium of Indian

companies led by the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) beat China in obtaining a concession to mine a large iron oxide deposit near Hajigak Pass in Wardak province. The envisioned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI) and the energy transmission line project CASA-1000 potentially affect CPEC and BRI in ways China does not want to see.

To the annoyance of Afghan government officials who complain that “all China wants to talk about is India,”<sup>71</sup> China thus probes Afghan government officials for reports on Indian military and intelligence presence in Afghanistan as well as economic investments — disconcerted, for example, with what China believed was the presence of Indian military pilots in Afghanistan.<sup>72</sup> India is equally suspicious of China's role and threatened by China's closeness with Pakistan. China appears relieved that India and Afghanistan did not sign a mutual defense treaty before 2014 (when the United States also opposed it, fearing it would provoke Pakistan to become even less cooperative on Afghanistan) and that its prospects are now dim. China is also pleased that the likelihood of Indian soldiers on Afghan soil is minimal, a development China does not want to see, given its strategic rivalry with India and its closeness with Pakistan.<sup>73</sup> That India is the only country out of the former supporters of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance that has not made its peace with the Taliban also plays into China's hands: the Taliban has repeatedly assured China that it would welcome, encourage, and protect its investments in Afghanistan,<sup>74</sup> while India's competition for economic contracts in Afghanistan would diminish.

With the reduction of U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, the China-India rivalry in Afghanistan is likely to intensify, particularly if India seeks to cultivate anti-Taliban militias or (as it has been doing) factions of Afghanistan's intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security. Even in the absence of acute and intensified tensions between India and China in Afghanistan, China could find itself in the midst of Pakistan-India proxy wars in Afghanistan as it was in the 1990s, this time not directly and solely opposing the Taliban but perhaps at least partially aligned with the Taliban and thus in a proxy war with India. Such a development may reduce China's capacity to broker a de-escalation of Pakistan-India tensions, including at

the nuclear level. Nonetheless, it is no longer obvious that a persisting U.S. military presence in Afghanistan could deter such proxy maneuvers and their pernicious escalation. The United States increasingly needs to rely on other tools to promote nuclear stability in South Asia in ways that go around, rather than through Afghanistan.

## CONCLUSIONS

For centuries, Afghanistan has been the unfortunate playground for geostrategic rivalries, a cross-section of cultures, trade, and power competition seen as a crucial buffer zone by regional and global powers. Their intrusion into Afghanistan has contributed to the country's institutional underdevelopment and instability, even as Afghan politicians and governing entities have learned to shake aid and military support out of the outsiders, so as to ensure at least a modicum of viability for their rule.

With visions such as a "New Silk Road" transforming Afghanistan into an indispensable and coveted regional economic, transportation, and energy land bridge, U.S. policymakers have sought to turn the Afghanistan predicament inside out, and convince regional and global powers to foster the country's stability instead of undermine it. In turn, the economic entanglements centering on Afghanistan would help ameliorate the many regional rivalries between India and Pakistan; China and India; Russia and China; Iran and Saudi Arabia; among the Central Asian countries; and between the United States and Russia, China, and Iran.

As the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan proceeds, this vision remains unrealized, though it still remains a beacon of hope for the future. None of the powers want to see Afghanistan plunged into another bloody civil war, but their rivalries are stronger than ever. And peace in Afghanistan also is yet only a beacon of hope... while the Afghanistan battlefield grows bloodier.<sup>75</sup>

With the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, does China want to take over America's role in the country? Could it? This is very unlikely. Neither China nor any other power is prepared to put up the level of investment the United States poured into the country since September 2001.

Nonetheless, the United States is leaving militarily and is very likely to reduce its non-military investments in Afghanistan as well, particularly if intense fighting and poor governance in Afghanistan persist and/or the Taliban comes to power in Afghanistan in some form. With the U.S. departure, China may become a far stronger actor in Afghanistan than it has been, if only because Washington has chosen to disengage. Still, the increase in China's relative power in the region is not a good reason for the United States to remain locked down in Afghanistan.



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