

# The Constraints of Partnership

## CHINA'S APPROACH TO AFGHANISTAN<sup>1</sup>

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Given China's alliance with Pakistan, strategic partnership with Russia, and key role in developing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Chinese leadership would seem to be uniquely placed to play a major role in Afghanistan. Indeed, the United States and NATO have long sought to secure China's constructive involvement, in particular urging China to provide more economic aid and to encourage Pakistan's cooperation with anti-terrorism efforts in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, China faces constraints in its bilateral partnerships with Pakistan and Russia as well as in its multilateral engagement through the SCO that will limit Chinese participation in international efforts to stabilize and develop Afghanistan.

Far from showcasing the SCO as an effective regional security organization, Afghanistan's regional security challenges thus far have highlighted its shortcomings. Similarly, China's partnerships with Pakistan and Russia have complicated Chinese foreign policy in Afghanistan. Instead of providing leverage, the Sino-Pakistani alliance has increased China's vulnerability to terrorist attacks and made Chinese leaders more cautious about participating in international efforts in Afghanistan, such as the Northern Distribution Network. China is now the largest foreign investor in Afghanistan, however, and has sought to integrate the country into Chinese economic and infrastructure networks in Central Asia, a strategy that may lead to tensions with Russia, which considers the region as its sphere of influence.

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### **The SCO and China's Approach to Regional Security**

Chinese analysts counter appeals by the United States and NATO to do more in Afghanistan by pointing to China's role in the SCO. The SCO has sought to promote political reconciliation, stability, and development in Afghanistan and to encourage it to develop good relations with neighboring states, first by establishing the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group in 2004, then by hosting a special meeting on Afghanistan in 2009, and most recently in June 2012 by inviting Afghanistan to participate in the SCO as an observer. Despite these efforts, the SCO was unable to address Central Asia's most recent security crisis, the ethnic unrest in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, in June 2010, and has thus far proven unable to stop the flow of drugs. In fact, the SCO has recognized its own limitations; at the 2009 conference, it called upon the United Nations to play the leading role in ensuring stability and development in Afghanistan.

Instead of providing an opportunity for the SCO to demonstrate its effectiveness, the decade-long conflict in Afghanistan has exposed many of the organization's weaknesses and raised questions about its purpose. Some scholars like Zhao Huasheng, an expert on Central Asian affairs at Fudan University, see the SCO playing a key role in promoting political reconciliation and economic development in Afghanistan, but it is unclear how this could take place since Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India are just observers of the organization, not members. Zhao admits that Afghanistan is unlikely to be admitted as a full member of the SCO in the short term, due to instability in the country and the presence of Western military forces. He has also stated that the SCO should proceed with caution on membership for Pakistan due to its own instability and conflict with India.

Other Chinese experts view the conflict in Afghanistan (coupled with recent instability in member states such as Kyrgyzstan) as posing a fundamental test for the organization's claim to generally play a key role in regional security. Wang Haiyun, a senior adviser to the SCO Research Center and a former Chinese military attaché to Russia, has commented that if the SCO is unable to address regional instability, "it could lose its cohesive force, even to the extent that there could be a threat to its survival." As Pan Guang, Director of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Study Center in Shanghai, has observed, the prospect of spillover of the conflict in Afghanistan to Central Asia raises three new challenges for the SCO: 1) working out its role in ensuring energy security in case of threats to the pipeline network; 2) establishing a rapid reaction force; and 3) determining the role the SCO will play after the departure of the International Security Assistance Force. At the June 2012 summit, SCO members took some steps to improve the legal basis for their cooperation in emergencies, but the organization requires consensus for its decisions, which thus far has proven elusive on key issues.

### **The China-Pakistan Alliance and China's Role in Afghanistan**

The United States and NATO view the Sino-Pakistani alliance as China's greatest form of leverage. Chinese analysts readily admit that there needs to be better coordination between Chinese policies in Central and South Asia but resist calls for greater pressure

on Pakistan. China's refusal to become involved in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) reflects its unwillingness to provide an alternative to Pakistan-based supply routes or appear to side with the United States against Pakistan. Chinese scholars argue that while China seeks to be viewed as a key regional player, it is likely to opt for a more limited and cautious role that would enable the country to remain true to its policy of non-interference and avoid being directly involved in the Afghanistan conflict, particularly in any subordinate role to the United States and NATO.

There is a practical side to this policy – China's effort to avoid being targeted by terrorists. This has proven less successful in recent years, however. Violent incidents targeting the 10,000 Chinese nationals working in Pakistan have increased. China has put increasing pressure on Pakistani leaders to stop these attacks and prevent Uyghur militants from using the country as a base. The increasing violence against Chinese also demonstrates that militants in Pakistan see advantage in driving a wedge between China and Pakistan, although these groups have yet to target China specifically because of its policies on Uyghurs in Xinjiang. According to Brian Fishman, a terrorism analyst, China's period of relative immunity from attack by global jihadist groups is likely to come to an end in the near future, especially as China develops its ties with Gulf states and becomes associated with policies repressing Muslims elsewhere, for example in Syria.

Pakistan has tried to placate China by extraditing any Uyghurs China claims were part of terrorist groups, over the objections of international human rights organizations. When two bomb attacks in the city of Kashgar in Xinjiang in July 2011 killed 12 civilians and six militants, Kashgar city officials complained publicly that the two suspected attackers were Uyghurs who had trained in Pakistan. Chinese President Hu Jintao reportedly called Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari to express his concern over the incident. Although some commentators reported that China subsequently requested permission for its own forces to go after suspected Uyghur militants based in Pakistan, highly placed Chinese and Pakistani analysts rejected such claims. In any event, the July 2011 incident showed that the Sino-Pakistani alliance was beginning to have negative consequences for the core Chinese interest of protecting the security of Xinjiang. Pakistan was deeply embarrassed by the incident, which led to China's first public denunciation of Pakistan. Several high-ranking Pakistani officials rushed to China to provide reassurance, and Chinese leaders traveled to Pakistan for consultations. However, a September 27, 2011 commentary in the Chinese newspaper *Huanqiu Shibao* [*Global Times*] left open the possibility that China might resort to force, stating that "if violent forces in Xinjiang gain ground, China may be forced to directly intervene militarily in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but this is clearly not the situation China would like to see." In November 2011, China and Pakistan held an anti-terrorism exercise, for the first time at the brigade level and attended by Pakistan's Army Chief, which rehearsed exactly such a scenario. In December 2011 Xinjiang officials claimed to have apprehended 15 Uyghur terrorists (who reportedly got lost) en route to Pakistan for training, which Chinese terrorism experts viewed as part of a broader trend of Xinjiang-based terrorists seeking more systematic training "in neighboring states." During a visit

to Beijing in January 2012, Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani reaffirmed his country's "full support to China's core issues including China's position on...Xinjiang." Yet in March 2012, Nur Bekri, the top Chinese government official representing Xinjiang, chose to speak to China's highest ranking legislative body, the National People's Congress, of the deep connections between some Uyghur and Pakistani militants, although he affirmed that the Pakistani government was China's "all-weather friend."

### **China-Russia Relations and Afghanistan**

In several key areas, China and Russia share parallel interests in Afghanistan. They are both opposed to any long-term U.S. military basing in Afghanistan or Central Asia more broadly. They are skeptical about the likelihood of any definitive military solution to Afghanistan's problems. China and Russia regularly discuss Afghanistan in their bilateral meetings and agree that the SCO should be encouraged to do more to address its security concerns, especially in combating drugs and terrorism.

Unlike China, however, Russia views the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan as directly detrimental to Russian security since 35 percent of the 800 tons of heroin produced in Afghanistan annually winds up in Russia, according to Russia's Federal Drug Control Service. Despite tensions in other aspects of U.S.-Russia relations, Russia has cooperated extensively with the United States and NATO in the Northern Distribution Network and has even participated in a joint anti-drug mission with the United States.

Like China, Russia is not a major donor to Afghanistan (the International Crisis Group reports that Russia pledged \$239 million from 2002-2013 and China \$252 million). Both Russia and China are involved in training Afghanistan's police in combating narcotics trafficking. Unlike China, however, Russia has provided some limited military aid (by supplying helicopters, paid for by the United States, as well as parts). While China is now the largest investor in Afghanistan (with \$3.5 billion invested in the Aynak copper mine and a major oil investment), Russia is contemplating a \$1 billion investment in the country's electricity sector and seeking to restart Soviet-era infrastructure projects.

As China and Russia become more economically invested in Afghanistan, there is some potential for greater regional cooperation, for example if both states should participate in the long-discussed but equally long stymied Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project. More likely is that Afghanistan will become a new factor in the emerging Sino-Russian competition for economic and political influence in Central Asia, as both China and Russia seek to integrate it within their own networks. Alexander Lukin, director of MGIMO's Center for East Asian and SCO Studies, suggests optimistically that economic rivalry need not lead to "uncompromising rivalry." Nonetheless, China and Russia already are vying for influence in neighboring Tajikistan. In Russia, Tajikistan is viewed as a front-line state given its porous borders, problems with drug trafficking, and vulnerability to extremist movements, while China focuses on the opportunities to improve infrastructure links between Xinjiang, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan.

## Conclusions

Two of China's most important neighbors and partners—Pakistan and Russia—are poised to play a significant role in post-2014 Afghanistan, but this will not necessarily be to China's advantage. Pakistan's own challenges with political stability and terrorism have put Chinese investments at risk and magnified concerns over their neighbor's influence on Xinjiang. Although Russia and China share many interests in Afghanistan, their visions for a post-2014 regional environment are likely to conflict in much the same way as they do in Central Asia.

While both China and Russia talk about the SCO as the ideal forum for discussion of problems relating to Afghanistan's security environment, the organization's capacity to address current regional threats has been limited. The weakness of multilateral cooperation in the region leaves room for a bigger role by other players such as the United States, India, and Iran, which from China's perspective may further complicate regional politics.

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