



Afghanistan: the view from China

by Andrew Small

2014 is a defining year for China's relationship with Afghanistan. After more than a decade spent on the margins of international efforts to shape the country's future, this summer China will take the diplomatic driving seat as it hosts the Istanbul Ministerial Process, the major regional conclave between Afghanistan and its neighbours, in Tianjin in August. Beijing's assumption of such a visible role at this sensitive juncture – between landmark elections in Afghanistan and the culmination of ISAF's mission there – is a deliberate act of political symbolism. In anticipation of the drawdown of Western forces, Beijing has been making it clear to both friends and rivals that, unlike the aftermath of Soviet withdrawal, it will not sit on the sidelines and watch the country slide into civil war.

The Tianjin meeting, the first such multilateral conference on Afghanistan to be held in China, is, however, only the most public manifestation of intensified Chinese diplomatic activity. Ever since Chinese officials understood that the US was not planning on maintaining a sizeable long-term troop presence in the region, they have convened an unprecedented array of bilateral and trilateral meetings with their Pakistani, Russian, Indian, and Afghan counterparts. China has also deepened its relations with the full spectrum of political forces in Afghanistan, signing a new partnership agreement with the central government and sending the first politburo-level visitor to the country in decades – while simultaneously upgrading its contacts with the Taliban.

2014 will be the test of whether the assets that Beijing brings to bear in shaping Afghanistan's strategic environment – its economic clout and its influence over the Taliban's Pakistani sponsors in particular – can genuinely have a positive influence on the country's stability. If not, China increasingly fears that it will have to prepare to deal with resurgent militancy in the region and potentially even in its own restive north-western province of Xinjiang.

Faraway, so close

While China and Afghanistan are neighbours, this is true only in a technical sense – their shared 76-km border is wholly lacking the infrastructure required to connect the two countries. For Beijing, the maintenance of the barren Wakhan corridor as a buffer zone is quite intentional. Traditionally, Afghanistan has only featured on China's political agenda when there has been a potential spillover of security threats, whether geopolitical or non-traditional in nature.

In the first decades after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), exchanges between the two sides were thin. But in the 1970s China grew increasingly concerned that the country was falling under Soviet influence, and started quietly extending support to resistance groups, the *Mujahideen*, even before Moscow's invasion in 1979. Beijing would thus become the arms-supplier-in-chief for the guerrilla war against the Soviet Union: they provided the

bulk of the weapons and ammunition that Pakistan distributed and for which the US and Saudi Arabia paid. Once the threat of Soviet encirclement receded, however, so did China's attention.

In the 1990s, as civil conflict convulsed the country, China was almost entirely absent from Afghanistan, leaving its Pakistani friends with a free hand to run affairs there as they saw fit. When the Taliban came to power in the late 1990s, with substantial material support from Islamabad, this channel proved crucial for safeguarding Chinese interests. Among the network of terrorist training camps that the Taliban allowed to flourish in Afghanistan were those belonging to the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a Uighur militant group seeking an independent Xinjiang. With Pakistan's help, Chinese diplomats met with the Taliban's reclusive leader, Mullah Omar, and secured his personal guarantee that ETIM attacks would not be launched from Afghan territory. For their part, the Taliban hoped that Beijing might help provide some protection from international sanctions. While it did little in the UN Security Council, China did set in motion some limited economic activities in Kabul and Kandahar that mitigated their impact. These exchanges helped to forge a relationship with the Taliban that continues to this day.

Following 9/11, Beijing was far from unhappy to see the fall of an Islamist theocracy that inspired extremists across the region and provided direct practical support to Uighur separatists. But China's ambivalence about Taliban rule in Afghanistan was then also extended to the government that took its place – and its Western backers. Like the Soviets before them, the US military presence in Central Asia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan elicited Chinese fears of strategic 'encirclement'. For much of the next decade, Beijing watched the conflict between the insurgency and the coalition forces unfold, quite content to see neither side gain the upper hand.

A state of concern

Afghanistan's emergence from isolation did open up economic opportunities for China, which took on a number of commercial projects (from road-building to telecoms) and in 2007 won the tender for the largest investment in Afghanistan's history, the Aynak copper mine. But a combination of growing security risks around the mine, unresolved land claims, and profound uncertainty about the country's trajectory means the project has now become the embodiment of Chinese fears. Much of Hamid Karzai's last visit to China in 2013 was taken up with discussions on whether to renegotiate the agreement or simply remove Chinese companies from the project.

The troubles of investing in Afghanistan, however, pale into insignificance by comparison with Beijing's broader concerns about the future of the region. While China certainly wished to see an end to the presence of Western troops, it is contemplating with mounting concern the fact that it will no longer be able to rely on the Europeans and Americans to contain the worst of the potential outcomes after 2014. Chinese economic and strategic interests are considerably more extensive than they once were, and the risks now appear to be far greater. In the 1990s, China trusted Pakistan to manage its relationships with the militant groups it sponsored; now it fears that an emboldened Taliban in Afghanistan, in concert with a new generation of Pakistani extremists, may undermine the stability of the country.

In some ways, China's tools in Afghanistan are limited. Beijing has no intention of taking on a security role that could lead it to clash with any of the different parties or risk it becoming a target for international terrorist networks. Its principal assets are economic and diplomatic. It can extend the promise to the different political forces in Afghanistan of much deeper economic commitments – a 'peace dividend' of sorts – if a stable agreement can be forged. It has already taken steps to include Afghanistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, according observer status to Kabul at the 2012 summit in China. And the Istanbul Ministerial Process provides another set-piece occasion for Chinese officials to demonstrate that Afghanistan can – with Beijing's help – hope to forge a position for itself at the 'heart of Asia' if it can transcend its status as a battleground or Western protectorate.

The hinge of China's leverage, however, is Pakistan. In the past, Islamabad proved willing to adjust its behaviour to accommodate its close friend, but Afghan policy has traditionally been seen as a privileged fiefdom, not an issue in which Beijing would be expected to meddle too much. For all sides, this is uncharted territory.

From an EU perspective, the broad shift in China's position can be seen as a positive development. European diplomats had long watched their Chinese counterparts contribute only the minimum to multilateral assistance efforts, and were among those rebuffed in their discreet attempts to solicit deeper Chinese involvement in Afghan security affairs. That has all changed. China will remain understandably cautious about its exposure in Afghanistan but it is now engaged, open to ideas, seeking to be constructive, and deeply concerned about what comes next.

Andrew Small is a Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

