

**Are China and the United States Rivals or Partners in Afghanistan?  
Lecture at Peking University  
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At their meeting in California in 2013, President Obama and President Xi Jinping agreed that they would try to create a new type of great-power relationship between China and the United States. The two presidents acknowledged that the two countries have different systems, ideologies, histories, and geographic locations. As a result they inevitably have disputes, conflicts of interests, and different points of view. At the same time, the high degree of economic interdependence of the two countries is unique in history. Every day millions of people in each country use products made in the other country and often, as in the case of the iPhone, they use products made jointly by both countries. Therefore, the two countries have a strong interest in preventing their differences from escalating into hostility or conflict. They may compete for resources and influence, but it is important to do so in accord with agreed rules and while recognizing the legitimate interests of the other.

Keeping such a dynamic competitive relationship from devolving into hostility or confrontation can be very challenging. One of the ways to assure

that the relationship remains within the limits of peaceful cooperation is to use diplomacy and international organizations to regulate and resolve differences. Another very important method is to develop closer ties by finding areas for cooperation. I believe that the leadership of both countries has concluded that stabilizing Afghanistan and enabling it to develop peacefully is a very fruitful area for cooperation between the two countries.

There are many people in both countries who find that conclusion surprising. Of course China's government and people condemned the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and showed sympathy for the U.S. In the UN Security Council China and the U.S. voted together on all resolutions related to Afghanistan. Both countries provided assistance to the new government.

Nonetheless, there were those in China who had suspicions about the U.S. and NATO military presence in Afghanistan. China has long opposed any foreign military presence in Asia. The belief that the U.S. is trying to "contain" a rising China is widespread here. Not only in China, but also in its close ally Pakistan, many people believed that the U.S. and NATO were using the terrorist attacks of September 11 as an excuse to acquire military bases in Afghanistan and Central Asia, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, which is close to

Tibet and has a lengthy border with the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Some Chinese officials continue to accuse the United States of having a “double standard” with respect to terrorism and think that the United States might use a military presence on China’s border to support separatism or extremism in order to weaken China.

Therefore, when the U.S. and Afghanistan issued a declaration of strategic partnership in 2005, some in China viewed that agreement as a potential threat. When the U.S. and Afghanistan concluded a formal bilateral agreement on strategic partnership in 2012 and began negotiating a bilateral security agreement as the basis for the long-term presence of U.S. troops, some in China also viewed that as a threat.

Similarly, in the United States, some people view China as a threat to U.S. economic interests and freedoms. These people, including several members of the U.S. Congress, do in fact advocate a policy of containment toward China. They believe that in Afghanistan China is exploiting the sacrifices made by the U.S. for the sake of its own economic interests. Afghanistan’s territory includes some of the world’s largest unexploited deposits of copper, iron, oil, gas, and rare earth minerals, which are in great

demand for new technology. When these critics of China see Chinese investments in Afghanistan, as in the copper mines of Mes Aynak in Logar province south of Kabul, they think that American soldiers have given their lives so that China can become rich and powerful.

They also see that the Taliban and other insurgents and terrorists fighting against U.S. troops and the government of Afghanistan have bases on the territory of China's close friend and ally Pakistan. Just as some in China accuse the U.S. of having a double standard, some in the U.S. accuse China of having a double standard on terrorism, because it does not prevent Pakistan from allowing the Taliban to attack U.S. and Afghan troops from its territory. They suspect that China tries to benefit from terrorism to pressure the United States to withdraw its troops from an area near China's borders. They criticize the U.S. government for not opposing Chinese investment in Afghanistan and for not insisting that the Afghan government award these contracts to U.S. companies. They want the U.S. to put pressure on China to force Pakistan to eliminate the Taliban and other terrorist groups.

Therefore, many ingredients for competition and hostility between the U.S. and China are present in Afghanistan. Today, however, the U.S. and

Afghanistan have signed a Bilateral Security Agreement that provides for a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan with the full support of China. China advised President Karzai of Afghanistan to sign the agreement and is urging the United States not to withdraw its armed forces from Afghanistan too quickly. Today, the U.S. does not oppose China's investments in Afghanistan. Rather than opposing those investments, the U.S. is concerned that China is implementing its contracts too slowly as a result of security concerns.

The U.S. and China have also begun joint programs to train Afghans in diplomacy, agricultural science, and health care. The program training diplomats was first suggested by China to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton while I was working in the State Department. While it is a small program, it is very significant. It is almost unprecedented for China to provide aid to another country in partnership with a third country. Throughout its history of foreign assistance, the People's Republic of China has believed that respect for the sovereignty of the countries for which it provides assistance requires a purely bilateral approach. The agreement between China and the U.S. to provide assistance to Afghanistan jointly expresses the realization by both countries that international cooperation in support of common interests can strengthen

the sovereignty of countries confronting violence and poverty. Both countries agree on the importance of a leading role the United Nations in assistance to Afghanistan.

How have these two countries overcome suspicions that could have led them into conflict? They have realized that they have common interests and that both will benefit if Afghanistan becomes stable. Both the U.S. and China believe they have suffered from terrorist attacks by people trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Continuation of armed conflict in Afghanistan makes it much harder for Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan's other neighbors to stabilize their own countries. While Pakistan is a close friend of China it has also been an ally of the United States. There has been a great deal of mistrust and conflict between the U.S. and Pakistan, partly because of the close relationship that has developed between the U.S. and India since the end of the Cold War. Nonetheless, the U.S. and China also have a common interest in preventing another war between India and Pakistan, which could escalate into a nuclear confrontation. While Pakistan and the U.S. have had different and sometimes opposing views on the future of Afghanistan, they cannot escape the necessity of cooperation, difficult as it may be.

But Afghanistan is not only a source of threats. It represents a great potential opportunity. Afghanistan is located at the intersection of most regions of Asia: the Persian Gulf and Middle East, or West Asia; the former Soviet areas of Central Asia; the South Asian subcontinent; and, of course, East Asia, where China is located. Through much of history, when trade took place primarily over long and difficult land routes, Afghanistan connected the trade routes that linked these areas, including those known as the Silk Route. Archeologists have found lapis lazuli from Badakhshan province in northeast Afghanistan, which borders Tajikistan and China, in tombs of the Pharaohs of the Old Kingdom of Egypt, dating back over four thousand years.

The development of blue water navigation in the fifteenth century led to the growth of maritime trade and the economic and technological marginalization of some landlocked areas such as Afghanistan and Central Asia. But the development of new forms of transportation and communication now provide us with the means to connect such areas to the world economy. Afghanistan today is located at the intersection of some of the most dynamic economies in the world. The transformation of China and the rapid growth of India are restoring the centrality of Asia in world affairs, as the U.S. has

recognized. The energy needs of these rapidly growing economies has impelled economic growth in both the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

Afghanistan’s enormous mineral and energy resources could add to that dynamism, even as the country’s location could have a multiplier effect by connecting all of these regions. The potential for positive interaction of these developments is enormous if they are connected by trade, transit, and energy pipelines, but continuing instability in Afghanistan has discouraged investment, slowed the implementation of existing projects, and reinforced mistrust where all would benefit from cooperation.

Both the United States and China have recognized this potential. At the 2011 session of the UN General Assembly the Secretary of State of the U.S. and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China spoke at a meeting where the U.S. presented its plans for what it called the “New Silk Road.” Soon afterwards I understand that there was a nationalist reaction among China’s netizens, who protested that the U.S. was appropriating an important part of China’s history for its own purposes. I was in the government at the time, and, in deference to Chinese sensitivities, we started calling the program a proposal for the Revival of Ancient Trade Routes instead of the New Silk Road, but this slogan never

became popular. A few years later, however, President Xi Jinping presented China's own plan for a Silk Road Economic Belt, which China has presented as an example of win-win international cooperation. An important aspect of this plan is the development of an economic corridor from China through Pakistan.

I have heard some people in the United States present the two projects, the New Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt, as being in competition with each other. If they are, it should be a healthy competition to see which country can promote mutual benefit more effectively. More importantly, given the interdependence of the Chinese and U.S. economies, it is very shortsighted to treat the two efforts as if one were at the expense of the other in a zero sum game.

Let us take the example of Afghanistan's mineral resources. If Chinese companies mine those resources, what will happen to them? They will be exported to China where they will be purchased by industrial corporations, including Chinese companies, American companies with factories in China, and Chinese-American joint ventures. These companies will employ Chinese workers to manufacture products designed in the U.S. and, increasingly, in China as well. They will sell these products to consumers in the U.S., China, Europe, and

all over the world. In every country where these products are sold, workers in transportation, finance, communications, advertising, media, and retail sales will gain employment delivering these products to customers. No one can say which country will benefit more from those investments.

Of course those resources can also be used to develop the military capabilities of both countries and, as we see in the South and East China Sea, there is an unfortunate trend toward confrontation in certain areas. Because of some events that have taken place in those areas, there are tensions between the two countries, which are felt most intensely by the military institutions. Mitigating these tensions is one of the most difficult challenges facing us today.

Afghanistan may offer an opportunity to lower tensions through cooperation between the two militaries. Because of the high level of threat faced by the country, the U.S. and NATO have financed virtually all of Afghanistan's National Security Forces. These forces currently cost about \$6 billion per year, equal to three times the internal revenue of the Afghan government and 30 percent of the Gross Domestic Product. Despite that effort, these forces still lack certain essential capabilities. This is partly due to the poverty and low level of education and literacy in Afghanistan.

Over the last two years, I have discussed this issue with multiple scholars and former officials and there are many areas where our countries could cooperate. One might be through the joint training of Afghan military and police officers by Chinese and American institutions. This could be modeled on the programs for civilian training that are already under way. In those programs, however, the Afghan trainees receive instruction separately in each of the two countries. If China were willing and able to deploy some trainers on the ground in Afghanistan, it might be possible for the Afghan government and the U.S. to find a way to cooperate with them on the ground, bringing the forces into cooperative contact.

The Afghan forces are particularly in need of airlift capacity, not just for combat, but also for non-lethal purposes such as medical evacuation and disaster relief. Afghanistan is a very mountainous country, which, like China, experiences serious earthquakes and floods every year. In order to reach those areas that require assistance, the Afghan forces need helicopters. China, I understand, is in the process of upgrading its helicopter fleet and will no longer use the MI-17 model, with which the Afghan military is quite familiar. China has a very large number of MI-17 helicopters that it will no longer use.

The U.S. has trained Afghan pilots in the use of MI-17 helicopters. Military experts have told me that there are many political and technical obstacles to cooperation between the Chinese and U.S. militaries on the provision of helicopters to Afghanistan and the training of pilots in their use, but I would like to propose that this is an excellent opportunity to find a way to overcome those obstacles in our common interest and in the interest of Afghanistan.

Of course, Afghanistan will not be able to sustain such a large security force over the long term. It will need to find a way to resolve conflicts among its people and between Afghanistan and its neighbors so that it no longer carries such a heavy burden of security expenditure. The Afghan government has stated that starting a dialogue and peace process with the armed opposition is one of its highest priorities.

Terrorism is not a purely military problem that can be resolved solely through the use of force. China and the United States agree with the Afghan government that political and economic means are necessary to eliminate the root causes of violence. This common view may form the basis for a dialogue between our two countries on our different perceptions and views on terrorism. China is fighting against what it calls the three evils of terrorism, separatism,

and extremism. The United States is equally opposed to these three phenomena. Sometimes, however, we have different definitions and advocate different means to deal with them. Both countries have a common view that states need to use legally mandated force to prevent and punish acts of terrorist violence. The U.S. sees separatism and extremism as ideologies. Although these ideologies can be used to justify violence, they are composed of ideas that are created through social practice. Even dangerous ideas cannot be eliminated through repression or the use of force. Ideas can only be overcome through better ideas and, more fundamentally, through political and economic reforms that will transform the social practices that produce such ideas. Especially in universities, faculty and students must be free to express and test all ideas in an atmosphere free of the fear of repression.

China, the U.S., and the Afghan government agree that in Afghanistan there is no military solution, and that only a political approach can eliminate the threat of terrorism and insurgency. Therefore, all three of these countries, together with the government of Pakistan, are involved in discussions of how to start dialogue and negotiations with the Taliban and other insurgent and terrorism groups. In the next few days China will host a state visit by the newly

elected President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani. China will then chair a ministerial meeting of the Istanbul Process, also called the Heart of Asia process, a regional grouping to support stability, peace, and prosperity in Afghanistan. I understand that in the course of these meetings China will announce some proposals on how to strengthen dialogue to end the armed conflict. I am sure that the U.S., Afghanistan, and Pakistan will all welcome those proposals.

As you know, President Obama will be coming to Beijing next month for an important summit meeting with President Xi. As in all such U.S.-China meetings, there is a very long and sometimes difficult bilateral agenda. My Chinese colleagues and I hope that the two leaders will take some time from those bilateral issues to discuss Afghanistan, and that they will decide to make Afghanistan the best example of cooperation between China and the United States. Not only Afghanistan, but also both great powers will benefit from such cooperation.