



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

**China and the United States on the Afghanistan-
Pakistan Region:
An Analysis of Goals and Perspectives**

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The world faces old and new security challenges that are more complex than our multilateral and national institutions are currently capable of managing. International cooperation is ever more necessary in meeting these challenges. The NYU Center on International Cooperation (CIC) works to enhance international responses to conflict, insecurity, and scarcity through applied research and direct engagement with multilateral institutions and the wider policy community.

CIC's programs and research activities span the spectrum of conflict, insecurity, and scarcity issues. This allows us to see critical inter-connections and highlight the coherence often necessary for effective response. We have a particular concentration on the UN and multilateral responses to conflict.

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China and the United States on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region: An Analysis of Goals and Perspectives

Since 2009, the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) at New York University has supported the development of regional approaches to Afghanistan by co-convening a series of structured dialogues among regional stakeholders. Since the initial meeting in June 2009 in Dubai, CIC has co-convened seven meetings including Istanbul (January 2010), Dubai (December 2010, April 2011), Oslo (June 2011), Dubai (September 2011), Oslo (September 2011), and Abu Dhabi (January 2013). Through this process, we identified China's shift in outlook and policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan to be one of the most dynamic, and potentially significant, factors in the region.

To better understand this shift, CIC has worked with Chinese partners and the US Embassy in Beijing to launch a series of US-China Dialogues on Afghanistan and Pakistan. This process was launched with meetings in Beijing in July 2012 and was followed by meetings in New York (January 2013) and Beijing and Shanghai (October 2013). The next round of the dialogue is scheduled for March 2014 in Beijing and will include two trilaterals (US/China/Afghanistan and US/China/Pakistan). This report provides CIC's summary of the conclusions of the dialogue up to now. It seeks to provide CIC's understanding of US and Chinese views on Afghanistan and Pakistan and to highlight areas of common understanding and continuing divergences.

The withdrawal of NATO combat forces from Afghanistan, scheduled to be completed at the end of 2014, presents China and the United States with serious challenges but also opportunities for cooperation in common efforts to promote stability in Afghanistan.

China and the U.S. have launched bilateral joint projects in Afghanistan, a significant departure from past practice. China has stepped up to assume the chairmanship of the Istanbul Process, a move welcomed by the U.S., as well as Afghanistan. Cooperation within this regional framework could have significant payoffs, as it requires collaboration

among countries that often perceive each other as rivals, if not enemies. This process has engaged not only China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, but also India, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, with a role for the United Nations and with the participation as "supporters" of states outside the region, including the U.S.

Such cooperation has the potential to improve this extremely important bilateral relationship, but it also confronts tensions between the two in other areas that nourish mistrust and undermines cooperation. Opportunities for cooperation are more evident in China's "back yard," to the West, than in China's "front yard," to the east, where tensions continue to rise over the East and South China Seas. Differences over Taiwan and North Korea, as well as the NATO embargo on arms sales to China dating from 1989 also contribute to an atmosphere that has hindered cooperation over Afghanistan.

The gradual rebalancing of China's priorities toward its West, however, constitutes a potentially significant countervailing force, and the U.S. and China have agreed to explore a significantly higher level of cooperation on Afghanistan.

China's predominantly Uighur Xinjiang province has been the scene of inter-ethnic conflict and separatist insurgency. According to many U.S. analysts, these tensions largely derive from domestic policy, particularly the immigration of ethnic Chinese workers into this predominantly Muslim and Turkic region, as the state seeks to accelerate development and integrate this border region more closely with the center. Many Chinese analysts also believe that the Xinjiang Uighur separatist insurgency has been supported beyond its borders. These tensions may escalate further into violence if alienated Uighur militants continue to receive terrorist and military training from extremist organizations outside of China. This threat is one of the principal reasons for China's heightened interest in the stability and security of the countries neighboring Xinjiang. Continuing China's economic expansion will also require access to energy supplies from Central Asia, as highlighted by President Xi Jinping's September 2013

trip to Central Asia where he announced Chinese support for a number of significant oil and gas projects.

Both countries accord a higher priority to this region than in the past. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, neither China nor the U.S. considered the stability of Afghanistan a strategic priority, and both have learned from that experience. The U.S., which experienced the 9/11 attacks from al Qaeda, then based in Afghanistan, now recognizes that terrorist safe havens in South and Central Asia can threaten its security directly.

China, an inward-looking developing country in the past, is now the world's second largest economy and the world's largest commodity exporter and second largest commodity importer. As a result, China has a growing demand for mineral resources, which are abundant in this region. As a state increasingly reliant on international trade and investment, China has concluded that it also has a broad interest in international stability, beyond narrow concepts of self-defense. China is increasingly considering cooperation with other states, including the U.S., to promote stability in their mutual interest.

Partial Convergence of Goals and Analysis

China and the U.S. have a common strategic interest in stability in Afghanistan after 2014. The two countries share similar views on the parameters of a desirable post-2014 political dispensation in Afghanistan. They also share interests in Pakistan's constructive role in stabilizing and reconstructing Afghanistan. They are seeking ways to make their different approaches to that country more complementary. Their attitudes toward the future role of India in Afghanistan and the role of regional cooperation are also moving in similar directions. Their biggest differences lie in their views of Pakistan's nuclear programs and doctrine, about which China does not fully share the strong concerns of the United States.

Both countries agree on many elements of a post-2014 Afghanistan, though with some differences in emphasis and priority:

- They agree that the political transition in Afghanistan must include both peaceful transfer of power to a new president in 2014, when elections are scheduled for April 5, and a political settlement with the Taliban. The U.S. is currently placing a higher priority on the success of elections and strengthening Afghanistan's democratic institutions, while China considers elections secondary to the need for a political settlement and is more skeptical than many U.S. policy makers about the prospects for Afghan stability without a settlement with the Taliban.
- The U.S. and China agree that the Taliban should not regain control of Afghanistan's central government. Both prefer that the Taliban be accommodated through a negotiated settlement that disarms them in return for integrating them into a constitutional setup and the ANSF. Both states have communicated this shared position to Pakistan, indicating not only support for a political settlement but, equally important, that a return to pre-2001 situation or any form of Taliban predominance by force is not acceptable. Since 2010 Pakistan's leaders have said that Pakistan is not seeking a Taliban-dominated central government but only a political settlement that includes the movement, but some actors in the country may still harbor old objectives. Given Pakistan's often-contentious relationship with the U.S. and steady partnership with China, this common message helps reinforce the constructive role to be played by the Pakistan government in reconstructing Afghanistan.
- Both agree that the international community should continue support for economic development and the operations of the basic functions of the state, including the ANSF, as agreed at international conferences in Bonn and Tokyo; China does not oppose the NATO plans for support to the ANSF, as agreed in Chicago. Both countries provide assistance to the ANSF, but while the U.S. has overall responsibility for these programs, China has indicated it might expand its support for the ANSF, but only in response to a direct request from Afghanistan. Its current participation is limited to small, targeted programs, largely addressing direct Chinese concerns about Uighur separatists.

- In a significant shift, China now supports a post-2014 U.S. and NATO military presence in Afghanistan to train, advise, and assist the ANSF, as well as to engage in certain counter-terrorist activities. In his speech to the November 23, 2013, Consultative Loya Jirga on the U.S.-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement, President Karzai cited support for the BSA from China, Russia, and India. Despite strong nationalist sentiments in China (especially among micro-bloggers), most Chinese policy makers no longer view a post-2014 U.S. and NATO presence as a threat or an attempt to contain China; in any case, they regard a security vacuum in Afghanistan as a potentially greater threat.
 - The U.S. regards Chinese investment in and aid to Afghanistan mainly as part of a cooperative international effort to stabilize the country rather than as freeriding on U.S. security provision. Nonetheless, the U.S. believes that China could do more to contribute to Afghanistan's security and stability and wants to remain engaged bilaterally to explore how the countries can make complementary efforts. Within the past year, China has initiated discussions on expansion of bilateral cooperation.
 - China strongly prefers that the U.N. Security Council mandate any post-2014 international military presence in Afghanistan, whereas the U.S., NATO, and others plan to provide assistance under bilateral agreements, if approved by the Afghan government. If the mission receives such a UN mandate (which appears unlikely, as the Afghan government does not support it), China may consider participating but otherwise has no plans for a direct security presence.
 - Both agreed that the growing narcotics trade rooted in Afghanistan, and the criminal networks that benefit from it, pose a significant risk to regional stability. Both agreed that an overreliance on crop eradication could have unintended consequences, but viewed counter-narcotics focused in interdiction and development as a possible area of cooperation.
 - Both the U.S. and China agree on the importance of developing a more robust regional framework for addressing Afghanistan and both share a common assessment on the limits of the existing regional architecture. They are engaging in consultations in connection with China's chairmanship of the Istanbul Process on how to strengthen regional commitment to stability and opposition to interference in Afghanistan.
- On Pakistan there has been a significant though as yet incomplete convergence of views:
- Both the U.S. and China have shifted from viewing Afghanistan primarily through a Pakistani lens. China no longer believes that it can defend its interests in Afghanistan solely or primarily through cooperation with Pakistan. The U.S. and China agree that they should engage with Pakistan separately but in parallel to encourage it to use its influence and leverage with the Afghan Taliban in favor of a political settlement with the Afghan government.
 - The two countries share the concern that the government of Pakistan may not be in a position to eliminate or even control terrorist groups in Pakistan. China emphasizes that Pakistan is responsive to specific Chinese concerns about groups targeting China, while the U.S. argues that such selective responsiveness does not address the systemic problem that all such groups benefit from the terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan. China does not deny such U.S. concerns but emphasized the respect for Pakistan's sovereignty and non-interference in its internal affairs. China places a very high priority on stable, long-term cooperation with Pakistan and, unlike the U.S., is not willing to press Pakistan on difficult issues that risk disruption of the bilateral relationship.
 - Despite differences of emphasis, the U.S. and China agree in principle on the benefit of at least informal coordination of policy toward Pakistan. Rather than trying to exploit intervals of U.S.-Pakistan tension to its own advantage, China has advised Pakistan to repair relations with the U.S. and work with the U.S. in stabilizing Afghanistan.

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- The U.S. regards India's role in Afghanistan as positive, focused on development and capacity building. U.S. concerns that high-profile Indian support to the ANSF might provoke a disruptive reaction from Pakistan are partially shared by Indian decision makers. The U.S. favors an Indo-Pakistan bilateral dialogue about Afghanistan, on which Pakistan has been unwilling to engage until very recently. Chinese views on the role of India in Afghanistan are currently in flux, with visible differences among individuals and institutions. While some continue to support Pakistan's long-standing opposition to an Indian presence or role in Afghanistan, growing concerns about the instability and weakness of Pakistan have led some Chinese analysts to take a more positive view of India's role. While it remains controversial, some have begun discreetly to explore the prospect of cooperation with India over the stabilization of Afghanistan through bilateral and trilateral discussions. China is making serious efforts to relax tensions with India on all fronts and is expanding bilateral trade and investment.
 - The starkest difference between U.S. and Chinese views of Pakistan is in attitudes toward Pakistan's nuclear programs. The U.S. considers the rapid expansion of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, and especially the forward deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, as one of the greatest potential security threats in the region if not the world. Forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons are the most likely to fall into terrorist hands. China, which is somewhat better placed than the U.S. to influence Pakistan's nuclear efforts, does not fully share these concerns and views this issue as too sensitive for cooperation with the U. S. China also claims to have limited influence over Pakistan's nuclear policy.
 - China, like Pakistan, viewed the 2005 U.S.-India civil nuclear deal as a signal that the U.S. recognized India as a legitimate nuclear weapon state and hence as naturally dominant in South Asia. Pakistan has sought a similar agreement with the U.S., which considers such a relationship impossible, given Pakistan's record of nuclear proliferation and its continued resistance to transparent investigation of that proliferation. China

has proceeded with aid to Pakistan's nuclear energy program and has supported Pakistan's aspiration to parity of treatment with India.

Means of Cooperation

Most cooperative behavior between the U.S. and China with respect to Afghanistan consists of indirect coordination and common engagement in multilateral efforts based on emerging common goals and analysis. The two states have no history of direct cooperation with each other in assistance to any third country, though they have coordinated policy on, for instance, North Korea. It is all the more significant, therefore, that China proposed in 2012, and the U.S. accepted, the joint planning and implementation of three projects in Afghanistan dealing with agriculture, training of health workers, and training of diplomats. In each of these programs the trainees receive instruction in both China and the U.S.

Chinese officials and analysts have emphasized what a big step such cooperation is for China, which has a limited history of operational coordination with other states. While these small projects will make only a minimal direct contribution to the future stabilization of Afghanistan, they have functioned as significant confidence-building measures between U.S. and Chinese officials working on Afghanistan, who meet and exchange views much more frequently as a result.

In the lead up to the leadership transition in November 2012, China's policy toward Afghanistan has become far more pro-active. The most visible results have been: the visit to Kabul by China's top security official in September 2012, the first high-level trip to Afghanistan by a senior Chinese leader in nearly half a century; the Central Asia visit by President Xi Jinping in September 2013 to discuss access to energy resource and the Afghanistan transition; China's decision to chair the Istanbul Process in 2014, announced at the April 2013 Istanbul Process Ministerial in Almaty, Kazakhstan; and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's February 22, 2014, visit to Kabul. China will host the 2014 ministerial meeting of the Istanbul Process in Tianjin on August 29, 2014. Hence China will be responsible, together

with the Afghan government, for preparing the agenda for regional support for Afghanistan's stabilization during this critical year of NATO's transition out of a combat role.

This decision signified a major shift, as China, along with Russia, Iran, and Pakistan, had been reluctant to agree to join the Process at the founding meeting in Istanbul in November 2011. In addition to reflecting Pakistan's hesitations about formally recognizing a role for India as part of Afghanistan's region, China also shared concerns with Russia and Iran that the process was a U.S.-backed attempt to provide regional consent to a long-term U.S. and military presence in Afghanistan and marginalize the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in which Russia and China play central roles.

The start of 2013, however, saw an acceleration of Chinese diplomacy on Afghanistan and a new openness to cooperation with the U.S. and Afghan governments. In addition to deciding to chair the Istanbul Process, China hosted or participated in numerous bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral meetings focused on Afghanistan, and related transnational issues such as terrorism. These have included repeated consultations with Russia and India, as well as the U.S. The U.S. views these Chinese activities as complementary to rather than competitive with its own efforts. With the upcoming crucial year of 2014, China and the U.S. are intensifying efforts to find a common approach to the key issues of Afghanistan's political and security transitions. These include:

- Seeking agreement on a post 2014 Security Council resolution on Afghanistan, in particular one calling for regional and global support for stabilization and a political settlement, and prohibiting destabilizing external interference. Such a resolution could even establish a mechanism for monitoring the process of stabilization in line with the resolution, perhaps in conjunction with the measures already taken in UN Security Council Resolution 1988, which imposes sanctions in individuals and organizations threatening the peace and security of Afghanistan.

- Establish a working group on how the U.S. and China can support a political settlement in Afghanistan and also devise common proposals for implementing any such agreement, as through appropriate Security Council resolutions.
- Devising ways to strengthen the Istanbul Process, perhaps through a more formal consultative mechanism, binding commitments to Afghanistan's sovereign independence, or a contact group of the leading members.
- Supporting Afghanistan-Pakistan and Pakistan-India dialogue about Afghanistan, including enlarging each such dialogue into a trilateral or multilateral format.
- Establishing a trilateral US-China-Pakistan forum that would meet regularly, including at the ministerial level.
- Engaging in intelligence cooperation and other counter-terrorist measures to combat terrorist groups based in the region.
- Supporting Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC), modeled after China's recent support for the Bangladesh Election Commission.
- Using the existing, if weak, U.S.-China military-military channel to discuss joint interests in strengthening security and security forces in Afghanistan. This group could also address specific obstacles to such cooperation, such as the U.S.-NATO ban on weapons sales to China.
- Expanding economic cooperation in Afghanistan, including joint investment in infrastructure projects.



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