Post-2014 Afghanistan Policy and the Limitations of China's Global Role

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Abstract

Although China is Afghanistan's neighbor, strategic partner, and one of its largest foreign investors, it has kept a low profile overall on Afghanistan compared to other states in the region. This article seeks to understand China's Afghanistan policy within the context of the Chinese government's overall approach to foreign affairs. A review of China's Afghanistan policy show a reluctant involvement, with domestic economic and security interests leading and foreign policy following. A final section examines the uncertain policy environment that China faces in devising an Afghanistan policy and some of the scenarios that Chinese scholars envisage for Afghanistan post-2014.

Keywords

China – Afghanistan – NATO – SCO – Central Asia

Introduction

Although China is Afghanistan's neighbor, strategic partner, and one of its largest foreign investors, China has kept a low profile overall on Afghanistan compared to other states in the region. There has been no "Beijing conference" on Afghanistan, though China will host the 2014 ministerial meeting of the Istanbul process, which includes Afghanistan's regional neighbors, plus twenty other supporting states. Unlike Russia and many Central Asian states, China opted not to participate in efforts to supply the international forces in Afghanistan. China is among the top investors in Afghanistan but has provided

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relatively little economic assistance to Afghanistan. China's reluctance to get involved in Afghanistan beyond investment, trade, and some small-scale training activities and dialogue, reflects the limitations of China's role in world affairs today. As David Shambaugh noted, China is a "partial power" and tends to emphasize its own needs above global ones, often resulting in a hesitant and risk-adverse diplomacy.[1] Moreover, even China's limited role in Afghanistan may increase China's vulnerability and most post-2014 scenarios involve unpalatable consequences, irrespective of China's strategy.

This article seeks to understand China's Afghanistan policy within the con-text of the Chinese government's overall approach to foreign affairs. Some observers in the U.S. and Europe see signs of change in China's Afghanistan policy as the drawdown deadline nears,[2] but this analysis of Chinese policy and perspectives sees little evidence of such a shift. Although the international community yearns for a *deus ex machina* to stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan after international forces depart in 2014, this is unlikely to be China. A review of China's Afghanistan policy show a reluctant involvement, with domestic economic and security interests leading and foreign policy following. This makes sense when Afghanistan policy is put in the context of China's overall foreign policy framework. A final section examines the uncertain policy environment that China faces in devising an Afghanistan policy and some of the scenarios that Chinese scholars envisage for Afghanistan post-2014.

China's Afghanistan Policy

Zhao Huasheng, an expert on Central Asia at Fudan University, has described China's role in Afghanistan as an "active player" with "low profile positions."[3] Until recently Chinese state-owned enterprises were responsible for most of the activity. The $4.4 billion investment by Metallurgical Corporation of China(MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation Limited (JCCL) in the Aynak copper mine and related infrastructure project thrust China into the limelight as the

1 David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

2 Andrew Small, "China's Afghan Moment," *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2012, http://www .foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/03/chinas_afghan_moment (accessed February 26, 2013); Christian Le Mière, "Kabul's New Patron? The Growing Afghan-Chinese Relationship," *Foreign Affairs*, April 13, 2010, www.foreignaffairs.com (accessed July 11, 2013).

3 Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives*, A Report of the Center for Strategic and International Studies Russia and Eurasia Program, March 2012, 1.

leading investor in Afghanistan in 2007. In 2011 the China National Petroleum Corporation announced it would invest $600 million along with the Afghan company, Watan Oil&Gas, to develop three oil blocks in the Amu Darya basin. During that same year, however, a consortium of Indian companies led by Steel Authority of India secured the tender for the Hajigak iron mine in Central Afghanistan, Asia's largest iron deposit, which, if completed as intended, would involve a $12-14 billion investment, enabling India to overtake China as the top investor in Afghanistan.4

As has been the case with Chinese investments in war-torn areas in Africa, such as Sudan and Libya, Chinese economic interests are likely to require changes in Chinese diplomacy and security policy. At present the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division provides security in Logar province, where the Aynak mine is located, one hour's drive south of Kabul. The Aynak area receives regular rocket fire, prompting many of the 700 Chinese workers at the mine to evacuate and leave operations to a skeleton crew.5 Once the U.S. forces leave in 2014, Chinese companies will need to provide their own security. Given the opposition by the Chinese government to any military involvement in Afghanistan, hiring a private security company may be one option. At least one Chinese private security company, Shandong Huawei, has been positioning itself to provide services to Chinese overseas investments, including Iraq, where CNPC operates another oil project.6

Apart from providing mine-sweeping training in China for the Afghan National Army, thus far the Chinese government has not contributed substantially to Afghanistan's security, either in terms of participating in the international forces, contributing to a security fund for the Afghan Army, or assisting with transport of supplies to international forces.7 However, Chinese military

4 Simon Hall, "China to Produce First Afghan Oil, Kabul Contends," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2013, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324103504578371912086399952.html (accessed July 12, 2013).

5 "Chinese Workers in Mes Aynak Have Warned to Quit Working on the Site," *Wadsam Afghan Business Portal*, June 18, 2013, http://www.wadsam.com/chinese-workers-in-mes-aynak-have-warned-to-quit-working-on-the-site-343/ (accessed July 12, 2013).

6 Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, "Enter China's Security Firms," *Diplomat*, February 21, 2012, http://thediplomat.com/2012/02/21/enter-china%E2%80%99s-security-firms (accessed July 12, 2013); "Bullets for Hire," *The Economist*, November 17, 2012, http://www.economist.com/news/international/21566625-business-private-armies-not-only-growing-changing-shape-bullets-hire (accessed July 12, 2013).

7 I explore Chinese views on these points in "There Goes the Neighborhood: Afghanistan's Challenges to China's Regional Security Goals," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* XIX, no. 1 (2012): 89–90.

or public security authorities may become more involved in the event a major evacuation of personnel is required due to a significant deterioration in security.

With the announcement of the planned drawdown of U.S. and international forces in 2014, Chinese diplomacy has become more active in an effort to forestall developments that would be detrimental to China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region or to Chinese interests in Central Asia and Afghanistan. On June 8, 2012, China and Afghanistan upgraded their relationship to a strategic and cooperative partnership. In the communiqué, the two sides agreed "not to allow their respective territory to be used for any activities targeted against the other side." To this end China and Afghanistan agreed to increase cooperation in combating transnational threats. Afghanistan specifically emphasized its support for China on "Xinjiang-related issues," as well as in combating what Chinese officials call the "three forces," i.e. terrorism, extremism, and separatism, and pledged to "take tangible measures to enhance the security of Chinese institutions and people in Afghanistan."8

The surprise visit to Afghanistan on September 22, 2012 by Zhou Yongkang, who at the time was the Minister of Public Security and a Politburo Standing Committee member, reflects concern for China's main security interest in the country, the spillover of terrorism and drug trafficking into neighboring Xinjiang, as well as early contingency planning for the security of the Chinese workforce in the country. This was the highest level visit by a Chinese official since Liu Shaoqi traveled to Afghanistan in 1966. During Zhou's visit, agreements were signed on intelligence sharing and training for Afghan police officers in China.9

Beginning with bilateral talks with its close partners, Russia and Pakistan, China is now also engaging in bilateral talks on Afghanistan with the United States and India. In addition to attending major international meetings on Afghanistan in Moscow and Istanbul, China has participated in several trilateral dialogues, with Russia and Pakistan, Russia and India, and Pakistan and Afghanistan. China has encouraged the SCO to play a greater role in addressing

8 "Joint Declaration between The People's Republic of China and The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Establishing Strategic and Cooperative Partnership," *Xinhua*, June 6, 2008, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t939517.shtml (accessed July 12, 2013).

9 Agence France-Presse, "Top Security Official Zhou Yongkang Makes Landmark Afghanistan Visit," *South China Morning Post*, September 23, 2012, http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1044343/top-security-official-zhou-yongkang-makes-landmark-afghan-visit (accessed July 11, 2013); "Afghanistan/China: Beijing's Profile is Set to Rise," OxResearch Daily Brief Series, *Oxford Analytica*, October 11, 2012. Zhou Yongkang is now under house arrest, pending an investigation of corruption charges.

the non-traditional security issues connected to the Afghanistan conflict, such as counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics.

In 2009, pinning its hopes on the supposed anti-Western orientation of the SCO, the Taliban sent a letter to the organization to its support in ridding Afghanistan of "colonialists" and occupiers.10 Although the SCO never took up this request, Chinese officials reportedly have met with the Taliban periodically over the last decade, ostensibly to address Chinese security concerns about its investments in the country as well as Xinjiang. China has sought to gain the Taliban's agreement not to harbor Uighur militants in areas under their control and to prevent attacks against its nationals working on resource projects in Afghanistan.11 So far this strategy has not paid off. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Reuters that blocking the Aynak project was one of his group's priorities because all governments were corrupt and the Afghan people would not benefit from the project. He added that if the Chinese companies obtained permission from the Taliban for their project, "their lives might be spared."12

Although China is one of the top two investors in Afghanistan, Chinese economic assistance to the country has been relatively modest compared to its assistance to Central Asian states. For example two days after China announced a $1.5 million Chinese grant to Afghanistan as a part of their June 6, 2012 strategic partnership agreement, the Chinese government awarded $1 billion in loans and aid to Tajikistan to build a cement factory and a power plant.13 By comparison, India, now the largest investor in Afghanistan, has disbursed $1 billion in economic aid to the country, with another $1 billion pledged.14 According to one highly placed Chinese expert, China is reluctant to provide more aid to Afghanistan because it is viewed as too close to the United States.15

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10 "Taliban Seeks SCO Support in Solving Afghan Crisis," *Xinhua*, October 15, 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-10/15/content_12235603.htm (accessed June 6, 2013).

11 Andrew Small, "China Shakes Hands with the Taliban," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2013, http://www.ipolitics.ca/2013/06/21/china-shakes-hands-with-the-taliban/ (accessed July 15, 2013).

12 Jessica Donati and Mirwais Harooni, "Exclusive-Chinese Halt at Flagship Mine Imperils Afghan Future," *Reuters*, September 27, 2012, http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/09/27/uk-afghanistan-aynak-idUKBRE88Q0XL20120927 (accessed July 12, 2013).

13 "China to Provide $1 billion to Tajikistan, Mostly for Cement Factory," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 8, 2012, http://www.rferl.org/content/china-tajikistan-cement-factory/24608113.html (accessed July 15, 2013).

14 Rani D. Mullen, "The Indo-Afghan Partnership," Indian Development Corporation Policy Brief, Centre for Policy Research, March 16, 2013, http://idcr.cprindia.org/p/afghan partnership.html (accessed July 15, 2013).

15 Interview with Chinese scholar, 2012.

Academic Discussion of Chinese Options in Afghanistan Post-2014

Discussion of China's Afghanistan policy among Chinese scholars reflects ongoing debates within China about dominant global trends, its own identity and strategy. Following Zhu Liqun's typology of viewpoints in Chinese foreign pol-icy debates, I will show how China's cautious Afghanistan policy illustrates the boundaries of its global role more broadly. Zhu Liqun, Assistant President of China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU) and Professor of International Studies at CFAU, a university connected to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, contends that Chinese debates on foreign policy focus on three interrelated issues: an assessment of *shi*, i.e. the main trend in international relations and configuration of the international system, China's identity, and Chinese strategy.

The following section examines Chinese academic viewpoints about Afghanistan, drawn from academic journals as well as some interviews with Chinese scholars and situates the specific policy positions in the context of broader thinking about China's foreign policy role. Many of the scholars cited here contribute policy advice to government bodies or work in think tanks affiliated with government agencies and these connections are noted. As in the United States, many Russia and Central Asia experts have been drawn into the discussion of China's Afghanistan policy. Those that contribute most prominently to policy debates, especially in English language publication, largely come from Beijing and Shanghai, though there are also important centers for Central Asian studies in Urumqi, (Xinjiang), Xian (Shaanxi) and Lanzhou (Gansu), and for South Asian studies at Sichuan University.

Perceptions of the Strategic Environment and China's Afghanistan Policy

Zhu Liqun sees the ancient Chinese concept of *shi* 势 as fundamental to understanding Chinese foreign policy thought today. For Zhu, *shi* refers to the distinctive tenor of the era and global configuration of forces which characterize it.16 *Shi* also seeks to capture the dynamics of a changing strategic environment and explain the likely direction of change. Others have translated *shi* as the strategic configuration of power or positional advantage.17 Sun-tzu famously

16 Zhu Liqun, *China's Foreign Policy Debates*, European Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Papers, September 2010, 17.

17 Alastair Ian Johnson translates "shi" as "actualized military force," based on his interpreta- tion of a more prominent role of the use of force in Sun-tzu's work. See Johnson, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 94, 97.

explained *shi* with the image of a log perched on top a high mountain, which shows the potential energy of things which appear stable.18

As Zhu explains, Chinese leaders craft their policies in response to their understanding of *shi*. For example, at the Boao Forum on April 27, 2013 President Xi Jinping called "peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit" the trend of the times. At the same time, the Chinese leader recognized the many challenges to stability in Asia and noted that while "upholding its sovereignty, security and territorial integrity, China will maintain good relations with its neighbors and peace and security" in Asia.19

Against the background of peaceful development as the primary global trend, Chinese analyses of the distribution of power internationally focus on the consequences of a U.S.-dominated international system and the emergence of other powers in a multipolar world order for China's interests and develop- ment.20 Even though the economic recession in the United States is a part of the rationale for the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Chinese experts see the proximity of the U.S. military and the expansion of U.S. interests and activities in Central Asia as the main problem for China, not American economic decline. According to some Chinese observers, the presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan constitutes a form of pressure on China, and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 put American military forces in one of China's neighbors for the first time since the Vietnam War.21 Zhao Huasheng further observed that the Afghanistan war led to U.S. basing in Central Asia, which is unfavorable for China.22

For Wang Shida, a scholar at the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), reporting to the Ministry of Public Security, the readjustment of U.S. policy in the region, involving a drawdown of forces and initiatives to encourage Afghanistan's regional economic integration

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18 Ralph D. Sawyer, "Introduction," to Sun-tzu, *The Art of War*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1994), 145.

19 Full text of Xi Jinping's speech at opening ceremony of Boao Forum http://news .xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/07/c_132290684.htm (accessed June 26, 2013).

20 Zhu Liqun, 23.

21 Lou Chunhao (CICIR, Beijing) and Zhang Mingming (Renmin University, Beijing) "Nanya de zhanlue zhongyaoxing yu zhongguo de nanya zhanlue" [Key Issues in South Asia and China's South Asia Strategy], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, [Contemporary International Relations], no. 2 (2010): 45. This is the journal of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) under the Ministry of Public Security.

22 Zhao Huasheng, "Zhongguo yu Afuhan—Zhongguo de lyi, lichang yu guandian" [China and Afghanistan: China's interests, stances, and perspectives], *Eluosi Yanjiu* [Russian Studies], no. 5 (2012): 7.

via the New Silk Road Strategy represents an effort by the U.S. to gain political advantage in the region at China's expense.23 He views the latter in the context of the U.S. rebalancing strategy in Asia, which is widely criticized in China as an effort by the United States to constrain China's legitimate role in Asia.24 Chinese scholars generally see increased great power competition ensuing from the announced withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan and efforts to integrate the country into infrastructure and energy networks.

China's Identity as a Regional Power and Nested Security Interests in Afghanistan

According to Zhu Liqun, the general consensus among Chinese scholars is that China is a regional power that is developing into a global power but still faces many challenges in its own modernization process.25 As a consequence, China pursues a domestically-driven foreign policy, concentrating predominantly on its immediate neighborhood in Asia.

Chinese security interests can be described as nested in the sense that the primary concern is domestic political stability, tightly linked to China's core interests in secure borders, which in turn are closely connected to China's regional security, and more broadly to global security trends.26 China's nested security interests are clearly apparent in discussions of Afghanistan policy, where most experts focus on containing threats to China's stability, especially to the security of China's western borders and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, and advocating a cautious policy involving limited economic involvement in Afghanistan's reconstruction, insofar as this fulfills China's regional economic goals.

According to Zhao Huasheng, Xinjiang's stability is the "starting point" for China's Afghanistan policy, in view of the longstanding ties that he saw existing between separatists in Xinjiang and the Taliban.27 Chinese scholars point to several threats in Afghanistan which could potentially destabilize Xinjiang,

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23 Wang Shida (CICIR, Beijing) "Meiguo quanmian tiaozheng Afuhan zhengce jiqi yingxiang" [The Comprehensive Adjustment of U.S. Afghanistan Policy and Its Consequences], *Nanya yanjiu*, [South Asia Research], no. (2012): 25, 27.

24 Idem, 26.

25 Zhu Liqun, 37-38.

26 Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell portray China as beset by concentric circles of vulnerability, with domestic stability at the center, followed by border security, regional secu- rity, and global security. Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 3–7.

27 Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan*, 6.

including terrorism, religious extremism, crime, and drug trafficking.28 Theynote that the spillover effect of such threats could solidify support within Xinjiang for what Chinese officials call the "three evil forces," i.e. separatism, extremism and terrorism.29

Given Chinese domestic, border security, and regional economic interests in a stable Afghanistan, what should China's role be? Chinese scholars are keenly aware of pressure by the international community for China to play a more active role in Afghanistan's stabilization and reconstruction, but, nonetheless, advocate a cautious approach. Some scholars, fearing negative consequences for Sino-Pakistani relations, are suspicious of U.S. efforts to involve China in pressuring Pakistan to cooperate more with international anti- terrorism efforts in Afghanistan.30

China's principle of 'non-interference' in the affairs of other states in the absence of a direct threat is at the heart of the resistance to greater Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, particularly in the security sphere. In addition to making China less of a target of terrorist attack and preventing damage to its foreign relations, as Central Asia expert Sun Zhuangzhi explained, 'non-interference' also puts China in a better position to "directly or indirectly communicate with various political factions in Afghanistan, conditionally promote negotiations between the parties and achieve national reconciliation."31

Despite broad agreement on the principle of 'non-interference,' there is evidence of some debate about whether or not it is in China's interests to do more in Afghanistan.32 A discussion in *Global Times* about China's role in the global war on terrorism by Dai Xu a PLA Air Force officer, Da Wei, Vice-Director of the Institute of American Research at the Institute of Contemporary International

28 Wang Shida, 27, Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan*, 7, Lou Chunhao and Zhang Mingming, 44; Zhang Li (Sichuan University), "Zhongguo dui Afuhan jushi wending de jushi tansuo" [China's Role in Stabilizing Afghanistan: An Assessment], *Nanya yanjiu jikan* [South Asia Research Quarterly], 4.

29 Li Liqiong (Renmin University, Beijing) "Guanyu Zhongguo dui Afuhan zhanlue de jidian sikao" [Some Timely Thoughts on China's Afghanistan Strategy], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], no. 8 (2010): 58–9; Zhang Li, 4.

30 Lou Chunhao and Zhang Mingming, 43.

31 Sun Guangzhi, (Institute of East European and Eurasian Studies, Beijing) "Mutual Cooperation Key to Rebuilding Shattered Afghanistan, *Global Times*, January 11, 2010, http://www.globaltimes.cn/opinion/commentary/2010-01/497679.html (accessed June 21, 2013).

32 Kerry Dumbaugh, *U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Chinese Views and Interests*, CNA China Studies, MISCD0023544.A1/Final, September 2010, http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/d0023594.a1%20u.s.%20strategy%20in%20afghanistan-pakistan%20chinese%20views%20and%20interests.pdf (accessed June 21, 2013): 14–15.

Relations (affiliated with the Ministry of Public Security), Sun Zhe, director ofthe Tsinghua University Research Center for Sino-U.S Relations, and Yu Wanli, an Americanist from Peking University, showed some differences of views about China's role. Colonel Dai Xu was the most skeptical and representative of China's traditional non-interference position. He stated categorically that "China cannot be involved in the US 'war on terror.' Our hands will get burned. China's strategic interests are not that deeply involved. We have our own interests and should concentrate on them.' By contrast, Da Wei, argued that "China could do more" on Afghanistan and Pakistan, while opposing China's use of force. Sun Zhe contended that the U.S. preoccupation with the war on terror- ism gave China "strategic space" which it should consider using carefully, though Da Wei disagreed, viewing the U.S. war on terrorism as an opportunity for U.S-China cooperation.33

China's Strategy in Afghanistan

One important debate in Chinese foreign policy circles stems from Deng Xiaoping's statement in 1992 that China should keep "a low profile" (*taoguang yanghui*) and focus on domestic development. Jiang Zemin later popularized the statement, usually attributed to Deng, that China should 'bide its time, hide its brightness, not seek leadership, but do some things.'34 Chinese experts writing on Afghanistan have been wrestling over the implications of this strategy: what should China be doing? How low a profile should China keep?

Zhao Huasheng sees China playing an active role in keeping with its primary interest in Xinjiang's security, while keeping a low profile in Afghanistan's security. This has involved support for reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, but no involvement with NATO's Northern Distribution Network, the alternative to the often attacked supply route through Pakistan. As Zhao explains, China has always been a critic of war as a means of resolving Afghanistan's problems and sought to avoid conflict with the Taliban, which could retaliate by supporting 'East Turkestan forces.'35 The more negative Chinese assessments see pressure by the U.S. for greater Chinese involvement as a way of shifting risk to China.36

Experts who advocate China's involvement in Afghanistan see opportunity to expand access to mineral and energy resources in Afghanistan, which could

33 "New US 'War on Terror' Chancy for China," *Global Times*, January 11, 2010, http://www .globaltimes.cn/opinion/editor-picks/2010-01/497512_3.html (accessed June 21, 2013).

34 Shambaugh, 18–19. Shambaugh finds no evidence that Deng ever made this statement.

35 Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan*, 4.

36 Zhang Li, 6.

provide an important link for trade and infrastructure development in Central and South Asia and Chinese interests in these areas.37 Such a strategy would support China's overall aim to boost its comprehensive national power and economic position in Asia.38

As David Shambaugh explains, the view that China should pursue its interests first, while predominant among Chinese scholars, is basically a pessimistic one which predicts a dangerous external environment.39 Apart from concern over the security consequences of greater involvement, some Chinese observers note that the overall lack of expertise on Afghanistan in China has limited the Chinese role.40

Other Chinese scholars view multilateral cooperation as important both for China's regional role and Afghanistan's stability, as long as China participates on its own terms and decides, based on its own interests, how best to coordinate its efforts with regional and global institutions.41 Sun Guangzhi argues that after more than a decade of international efforts, it is clear that neither military force nor "blindly" expanding economic aid for Afghanistan's reconstruction is likely to solve the problems in that country. Instead he argues that China can work best through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Asian Development Bank, and the United Nations.42 Sun insists that this does not mean that China is hiding from international involvement; to the contrary, in his view China must take a "roundabout" route rather than intervening directly.43 The SCO, founded three months before 9/11, in July 2001, has evolved, in the shadow of the Afghanistan war, from an association of states seeking to resolve common border security problems, to a regional economic and security organization. Although its membership remains confined to China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, the SCO now includes

37 Zeng Xiangyu and Zhang Chunyan, "53–4; He Jie (PLA Foreign Languages Institute,Henan) "Zhongguo yu Afuhan youqi hezuo tanxi" [An Analysis of China's Oil and Gas Cooperation with Afghanistan], *Zhongguo Shiyou Daxue Xuebao (Sheke Kexue Ban*) [Journal of China Petroleum University (Social Sciences Edition)] 28, no. 6 (2012): 9.

38 Gilbert Rozman, *Chinese Strategic Thought toward Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5.

39 Shambaugh, 32.

40 Zhang An (Anhui University and Renmin University, Beijing) "Zhonguo yu Afuhan guanxi shi yanjiu lue" [A Review of the History of Relationship between China and Afghanistan], *Gaoxiao Sheke Dongtai* [Social Science Perspectives in Higher Education], no. (2012): 20.

41 This viewpoint emerges from a broader discussion among Chinese foreign policy experts about China's international responsibility. See Zhu Liqun, 40–44.

42 Sun Guangzhi.

43 *Ibid*.

Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Iran as observer states, and Turkey as a dialogue partner.44 Even before admitting Afghanistan as an observer in 2012, the SCO established an Afghanistan-SCO contact group in 2004 and held a meeting about Afghanistan in 2009.45 At the 2009 meeting, however, the SCO attempted to lower expectations about its own role in conflict resolution and reconstruction in Afghanistan and issued a declaration urging the United Nations to play the lead in promoting economic stability and security there.46

Chinese experts suggest that the SCO could play an important role in anti-terrorism cooperation, economic reconstruction, and combating drug trafficking and should do more in these areas.47 Most scholars emphasize that the SCO is not a military alliance and discount the possibility that the organization could play any military role, though one analyst proposed that the organization could develop a command structure if there was a consensus among the membership to do so.

The SCO established a Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) in Bishkek in 2002 and then relocated it to Tashkent in 2004. Cooperation among law enforcement agencies of SCO member states has been proceeding and SCO member states have been using RATS to pool information about separatist, extremist, and terrorist activity, though members differ as to which groups should be labeled terrorist. At best such efforts may assist members to create a buffer against the spread of terrorism from Afghanistan.

Although the SCO includes a Business Council and an Inter-Bank Association and has long discussed creating a development bank, multilateral economic cooperation among member states in the SCO has not achieved its promise due to competing agendas in Russia and China and rivalries among Central Asian states. Given the obstacles to regional economic coordination among the SCO members, it is unclear how the SCO would play a prominent role in economic reconstruction in Afghanistan, an SCO observer state, as some Chinese experts propose.48

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44 Mongolia is also an observer and Belarus and Sri Lanka are dialogue partners.

45 Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan*, 11–12.

46 Declaration of the Special Conference on Afghanistan Convened under the Auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," March 27, 2009, http://www.setsco.org/EN/show.asp?id=98 (accessed, June 6, 2013).

47 He Ming (East China Normal University, Shanghai) "Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi yu Afuhan chongjian wenti" [The SCO and Afghanistan's Reconstruction], *Nanya yanjiu* [South Asia Research], no. 4 (2012): 81. Interviews with Chinese scholars.

48 Yu Jianhua (Institute of Eurasian Studies, Shanghai) "Afuhan wenti yu shanghai hezuo zushi" [The Afghanistan Question and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization], *XiYaFeizhou* [West Asia Africa], no. 4 (2012): 71–72.

Drug trafficking is an area where Russia and China have a strong interest in regional cooperation within the SCO, but Central Asia is the primary transit area for drugs from Afghanistan headed to Russia and Europe. As Yu Jianhua, Director of the Institute of Eurasian Studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences noted, "the ancient silk road has become a drug trafficking corridor."49 The security officials, border guarders, and law enforcement officials in Central Asia who are supposed to be countering the narcotics trade actually are involved with it themselves.50

Some Chinese scholars also envisage a role for the SCO in promoting political reconciliation in Afghanistan.51 Afghanistan, Pakistan and India are just observers, however, not members of the organization. According to Zhao Huasheng, as long as Afghanistan continues to be politically unstable and Western military forces are based there, it would be hard to invite the countryto be a full member. Ongoing instability in Pakistan and the Indo-Pakistani conflict are obstacles to Pakistan's membership. India has yet to seek full membership.52

Moreover, Chinese Central Asia experts highlight the differences among SCO members over the best strategy for the organization to employ.53 Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which border on Afghanistan, are most directly concerned by the ongoing conflict there. Uzbekistan has encouraged a role forthe U.S. and NATO, as well as Russia, and Afghanistan's neighbors (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, China, and Pakistan) in a 6 + 3 framework for dialogue, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have encouraged the SCO to create a buffer zone to prevent spillover of the Afghanistan country. Kazakhstan reportedly also supports the SCO buffer zone concept, but sees the need to involve

49 Yu Jianhua, 69.

50 Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 158; Richard Weitz, "The SCO's Failure in Afghanistan," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, February 16, 2011, http://old .cacianalyst.org/?q = node/5494 (accessed June 21, 2013).

51 Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan*, 13.

52 Zhao Huasheng, "Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi fazhan de kenengxing he xiandu" [The SCO's Prospects for Development and Limitations], *Guoji guancha* [International Survey], no. 3 (2011): 30–31.

53 Yu Jianhua, 70; Qiang Xiaoyun (Institute of International Relations, Shanghai) "Cong Afuhan wenti de ZhongYa yingxiang kan weilai Shanghai Hezuo Zhuyi de anquan hezuo" [SCO Security Cooperation in the Future Viewed from the Impact of the Afghanistan Question on Central Asia], *Shanghai shangxue xuebao* [Journal of Shanghai Business School] 13, no. 4 (2012): 11–12.

other regional powers such as India and Iran. With the exception of China, SCO states have cooperated with the U.S and NATO Northern Distribution Network. For some experts, the conflict in Afghanistan presents a real challenge to the SCO as an organization. With the U.S.-Afghanistan strategic forces, the SCO has to adjust to the geopolitical reality of a long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, beyond 2014.54 Pan Guang, Vice Chairman and Professor of the Shanghai Center for International Studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, and Director of the SCO Studies Center, has suggested that the SCO may need to take on new responsibilities post-2014, such as providing the security of regional infrastructure like oil pipelines, or responding to emerging threats, for example, by creating a rapid reaction force.55 If involvement is risky, then so is non-involvement. As Wang Haiyun, a senior adviser to the SCO Research Center and a former Chinese military attaché to Russia, noted, if the SCO is unable to address regional instability such as occurred in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 , "it could lose its cohesive force, even to the extent that there could be a threat to its survival."56

Pan Guang has argued that the SCO should work with other organizations involved in Afghanistan, including NATO and the United Nations. In Pan Guang's view the SCO should explore a range of ideas to expand dialogue on Afghanistan, SCO + 1 (with the United States), SCO + 2 (with the U.S. and the EU and/or NATO), SCO + 3 (also including Japan), or a more formal SCO Regional Forum, modeled on the expanded out-of-area membership for the ASEAN Regional Forum.57 Pan Guang also has urged China to seriously consider any future United Nations request for China to contribute peacekeeping forces.58

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54 He Ming, 78.

55 Pan Guang, "Zoujin di erge shinian: Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi mianlin de tiaozhan he jiyu" [Entering the Second Decade: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Confronts Challenges and Opportunities], *Guoji guancha* [International Survey] no. 3 (2011): 19.

56 Wang Haiyun, "Zhongya anquan xingshi ji qianghua Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi wei wen hezuo de sikao" [The Central Asian Security Situation and Ideas for Strengthening and Stabilizing Security Cooperation in the SCO], *ZhongYa luntan lunwen* [Central Asian Forum Papers], no. 1 (2011): 14.

57 Pan Guang, "China and US in Central Asia: Role of the SCO and Possibility of Cooperation in Afghanistan," *Chinafocus.org*, September 7, 2011, http://www.chinausfocus.org, accessed July 3, 2013 (accessed June 22, 2013). Yu Jianhua also supported coordination between the SCO, the United States, and NATO, on issues where their interests converege. See Yu Jianhua, 72.

58 Remarks by Pan Guang, "Understanding China's Role in Central Asia and Afghanistan," The Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., September 18, 2012, http://www.jamestown .org/press/events/video-understanding-chinas-role-in-central-asia-and-afghanistan/ (accessed July 3, 2013).

China's Uncertain Policy Environment

Chinese experts debate their foreign policy options within the context of a deeply uncertain policy environment. Involvement in Afghanistan's security is perceived as risky, but inaction also would potentially expose China to additional threats. Even if China limits its involvement to investment activity in Afghanistan, such projects make the Chinese nationals working there potential terrorist targets and may have unintended consequences for China's relations with local Afghan people. Above all, Chinese experts are unsure what will happen in Afghanistan after 2014 and envisage a variety of scenarios, with different implications for China.

China's Vulnerability to Terrorist Attack

One of the benefits of China's non-interference policy has been to reduce the likelihood of its becoming a target of terrorist attack. Afghan officials hoped that the Chinese presence in their country would prove to be a disincentive to attacks by groups affiliated with elements of the Pakistani government.59 However, Chinese strategists are concerned that if China played a security role in Afghanistan, this would encourage links between militants in Xinjiang and terrorists in Pakistan and Afghanistan.60 Because the Wakhan Corridor, the narrow strip of Chinese territory bordering on Afghanistan, has no passable road from the Afghan border, the threat of terrorist infiltration is largely from Pakistan. To address this potential threat, China has been sharing intelligence and providing counter-terrorism training for Pakistani forces in Xinjiang and Sichuan.61

As Chinese investments in Afghanistan have grown, there have been increasing attacks on Chinese nationals in the country. Chinese scholars note that China's investments in Afghanistan put Chinese workers there at risk and broaden the scope of the security threat to China nationals beyond Xinjiang. Chinese experts warn that infrastructure projects require a lot of investment, make easy targets, and are especially vulnerable due to their long construction time.62 Because of the corruption and weakness of the Karzai government,

59 Sutirtho Patronobis, "Afghanistan Sees China as a Buffer against Terror," *Hindustan Times*, February 27, 2012, http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/China/Afghanistan-sees-China-as-buffer-against-terror/Article1-817814.aspx (accessed July 9, 2013).

60 Stina Torjesen, "Fixing Afghanistan: What Role for China?" Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre, *NOREF Policy Brief* No. 7, June 2010, 5.

61 Interview with Chinese scholar, 2011.

62 Zeng Xiangyu and Zhang Chunyan, 53.

some observers argue that to be able to address future security risks such as kidnapping of personnel, Chinese companies will need to develop ties with warlords and tribal leaders who control the areas where resource projects are located.63

Fallout from Major Chinese Corporate Interests in Afghanistan

The large investments by MCC/JCCL and CNPC in Afghanistan's resource sector provide a sharp contrast with the very cautious Chinese government involvement with international efforts to assist the country's reconstruction and security. According to Erica Downs, these investments, like most overseas deals by Chinese state-owned enterprises, "are examples of the companies leading the flag."64 At the same time that Chinese officials sought to limit their country's exposure to Afghanistan's instability, Chinese corporations saw opportunity. For MCC, the Aynak project would further the company's goals over the past decade to develop a portfolio of overseas mining operations that would be more lucrative than its mainstay domestic construction business, while MCC's partner, JCCL, sought to secure new copper supplies at a time of rising demand in China.65 For CNPC, investment in Afghanistan was the natural extension of its operations in the Amu Darya basin in Turkmenistan, and a means of creating new synergy among its Central Asian operations.66 Although the Chinese government agreed to support these projects primarily to enhance China's access to mineral and energy resources, the deals also enable China to demonstrate a contribution to Afghanistan's reconstruction.67

Some Chinese observers believe that these investments were premature, given the unpredictable security environment in Afghanistan.68 Others fear that the resource projects will have unforeseen negative consequences. Due to a lack of trained workers in Afghanistan, for example, Chinese companies have been using some of their own labor, leading to dissatisfaction in local communities hoping for the projects to generate employment opportunities. The presence of the Chinese workers, who lack familiarity with Afghanistan's cultural traditions and beliefs, and do not speak local languages, may lead to difficulties in economic cooperation between the two countries.69

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63 He Jie, 9

64 Erica Downs, "China Buys into Afghanistan," *SAIS Review* XXXII, no. 2 (2012): 66.

65 Downs, 68.

66 Downs, 69.

67 Downs, 70.

68 Interview with Chinese scholar, 2011.

69 He Jie, 9–10.

Uncertainty about Developments in Afghanistan Post-2014

In the best case scenario, China focuses on Afghanistan's economic development and reconstruction in cooperation with the U.S., Russia, neighboring states, other great powers and the SCO, but without getting drawn into ensuring Afghanistan's security.70 According to Fudan University Professor Zhang Jiaoding, in this way, China can benefit from investments in Afghanistan's resource sectors, take initiative in economic cooperation with the country, "while avoiding the failure of U.S intervention." Zhang further stated that "China may not be the biggest winner in Afghanistan, but it will certainly not be the biggest loser."71

Nonetheless, Chinese scholars envisage several negative scenarios for Afghanistan's future development which would have a detrimental impact on Chinese interests:

- International forces exit, creating a security vacuum

In this scenario, U.S. and international forces leave Afghanistan and the country falls into anarchy, as was the case with the Soviet Union's departure in 1989.72 Such an outcome would enable terrorist groups to use Afghanistan as a base and drug traffickers to thrive. For China, this is the most negative scenario, as it would imperil Xinjiang's security and increase the security risks to Chinese resource investments in the country.73

- The Karzai government is overthrown, leading to a resurgence of the Taliban in cooperation with warlords

As noted earlier, the Chinese government has been investing in the stability of the Karzai government, by signing a strategic partnership in 2012 and moving forward with major resource investments. Some Chinese analyses downplay the possibility that the Taliban could return to power in the same way as it did in the 1990s, due to the lack of popular support for the group and its

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70 Zeng Xiangyu and Zhang Chunyan, 54.

71 Zhang Jiaodong (Fudan University, Shanghai), "Can China Be the Winner in Afghanistan," *Global Times*, February 26, 2013, http://www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.aspx?tabid=99&tabmoduleid=94&articleId=764325&moduleId=405&PortalID=0 (accessed February 26, 2013).

72 He Ming, 73.

73 Zhang Jiaodong, "Can China Be the Winner in Afghanistan," *Global Times*, February 26, 2013.

association with terrorism. Nonetheless, Chinese scholars note that the corruption of the Karzai administration weakens its hold on power and may lead warlords to team up with the Taliban to overthrow the government.74

Chinese officials have been hedging against that eventuality by maintaining contacts with the group. Such contacts necessarily are cautious, for fear of alienating the Karzai government, and it is unclear how successful they have been so far.

- Afghanistan has a stable government with good relations with the United States, which maintains bases in the country, and seeks to influence its domestic development along democratic lines

Although Chinese observers are concerned about instability in Afghanistan leading to non-traditional security threats, they view a stable Afghanistan with U.S. bases and a government amenable to democratization as a threat to China's political and strategic goals in Central Asia. Although Afghanistan's traditional culture, religious beliefs, and ethnic mix would pose a real challenge to the development of a Western-style democracy, Chinese experts see the possibility of ongoing forward basing by the U.S. in Afghanistan as a more likely challenge.75

- Afghanistan becomes the locus of great power competition

While U.S. policy is of primary concern, Chinese experts also note the potential for great power competition in Afghanistan, which creates an additional obstacle to the country's stabilization. As Zhang Jiaodong argued, extremists take advantage of the competing and sometimes conflicting interests of Afghanistan's friends and neighbors to weaken its government is weakened. Aid funds also are used inefficiently as a consequence of the lack of coordination and duplication of efforts by donor states.76

Despite the great power competition in the region, Chinese scholars urge their government to have more dialogue about Afghanistan with Pakistan, India, Russia, and the United States because of the high cost of regional instability for Xinjiang.77 As the international forces prepare to withdraw observers inside Afghanistan and in the United States are looking at China as a possible

74 He Ming, 74- 75; He Jie, 9.

75 He Ming, 76; Zhang Jiaodong.

76 Zhang Jiaodong.

77 Ma Yong, 36; Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan*, 19. Lou Chunhao, 47.

mediator in the conflict because of its close ties to Pakistan and more active regional diplomacy in recent years. Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang's choice of India for his first state visit in May 2013 appeared to lend support to this viewpoint. Both India and China have major economic interests in Afghanistan's resource sector and need a stable environment to pursue them,78 though if India is successful, the country will emerge as a greater economic rival for China in Central Asia.

Despite an ongoing Sino-Indian dialogue on counter-terrorism for more than a decade, however, little has been achieved due to the fundamental difference between the two in their view of Pakistan's role in regional instability and terrorism. Although China has protested strongly when Chinese nationals have been attacked by Pakistani militants, thus far the Chinese government has continued to regard the Sino-Pakistani alliance as a priority.79

Conclusion

After criticizing the U.S. for its military involvement in Iraq, China went on to become a major investor in Iraqi oil. Is this scenario repeating itself in Afghanistan? After remaining largely aloof of the conflict in Afghanistan for more than a decade, is China positioning itself to play a major economic and diplomatic role in the country after international forces withdraw in 2014? One important difference between Iraq and Afghanistan is that China shares a border with Afghanistan and cannot simply withdraw in the event that the security situation deteriorates. For better or worse, Afghanistan is in China's neighborhood and Chinese officials have to find ways to address its security problems as well as seeking economic opportunity. Moreover, to the extent that Afghanistan is central to China's broader plans for infrastructure development and regional trade with South and Central Asia, China has added incentive to contribute to its stabilization and reconstruction.

Nonetheless, China is unlikely to play a leading role in Afghanistan in the coming years. Unlike the North Korean situation, where China was integral to efforts to bring regional states and the United States to the negotiating table, in

78 Prathapan Bhaskaran, "Speaking Freely: China is the Key to India's Afghan Puzzle, "*Asia Times Online*, July 1, 2013, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/SOU-02-010713.html (accessed July 11, 2013).

79 Harsh V. Pant, "Common Interests in Afghanistan test China-India Ties," *The National* (United Arab Emirates), May 5, 2013, http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/common-interests-in-afghanistan-test-china-india-ties (accessed July 9, 2013).

Afghanistan China has little leverage and fewer direct interests. Since the Obama Administration's announcement of its planned withdrawal timetable, Chinese diplomats have been more active in discussing Afghanistan with regional states and providing a greater opportunity for increased security dialogue with the United States and India. However, conflicting interests among Afghanistan's neighbors and friends are likely to complicate a diplomatic solution.

A close reading of Chinese scholarship and discussion with experts reveals a narrow focus on China's nested security interests, with Xinjiang at the core, and concern for the neighborhood and China's broader border security underpinning China's security interest in Afghanistan. Scholars who urge China to play a more active role largely see that taking place through investment in resource and infrastructure projects as well as participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, though a few voices argue for broader engagement with the United Nations or NATO. By and large Chinese experts see peril at every turn of events in Afghanistan and their cautious policy prescriptions are connected to their pessimistic assessments of likely post-2014 scenarios. Moreover, despite some discussion among Chinese scholars, "non-interference" continues to hold sway as a key principle of Chinese foreign policy, making it unlikely for China to lead any major initiative on Afghanistan, though it may choose to cooperate with others in support of Chinese immediate interests.