Sino-Afghan Relations in the Twenty-First Century: From Uncertainty to Engagement?

Jonathan Z. Ludwig*

Abstract: While the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has worked to expand cultural and economic ties throughout its near abroad and beyond in the last decade with great alacrity, the same cannot be said for its relationship with neighbouring Afghanistan. This paper will explore the history and nature of the Sino-Afghan relationship with an emphasis on the post-9/11 years. It will offer some reasons why the relationship is not as well established as with other countries in the Eurasian region and beyond, and it will explain how the relationship has developed in the last decade. Finally, it will make some suggestions as to what the future of this relationship might hold after the final withdrawal of NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan troops in light of China’s often conflicting concerns about and goals in Afghanistan.

Introduction

In the days after the attacks of 11 September 2001 much of the world lined up behind the United States and its subsequent actions in Afghanistan: NATO invoked Article 5, which states that an attack on one is an attack on all,¹ and Russia provided information on Afghan caves and other topographical features.² The subsequent collapse of the 6 + 2 Group³ on Afghanistan, an informal coalition of eight nations that had been attempting to bring about a governmental reconciliation within the country since 1999 under the aegis of the United Nations (UN), ended the role of regional players in Afghanistan. Neither the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),⁴ which included many of the border nations that participated in the 6 + 2 Group, nor the PRC itself, which was a founding member of the SCO and also a border nation, stepped in to fill that regional vacuum. However, they also did nothing to prevent the actions that would lead to the formation of the NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan forces. Both were generally content to sit on the sidelines, watching what would unfold and

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¹ Jonathan Z. Ludwig is Senior Lecturer of Russian at Rice University, where he teaches Russian language and literature and the history of Central Asia and Afghanistan. He has lectured and taught extensively on Central Asia, presenting topics as diverse as the March 2005 Kyrgyz Revolution, Russian-American cooperation and confrontation in Central Asia during the ‘War on Terror,’ Chinese relations with the Central Asian states, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Tarim Basin mummies, the role of Central Asia in the development of the early Russian state and the subsequent role of Russia in creating modern Central Asia, and the Kyrgyz ‘streetocracy.’ He has taught a course on Afghan history at Rice University’s Glasscock School of Continuing Studies, which coincided with the Houston showing of ‘Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul.’ He is currently researching President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s 1959 trip to Afghanistan and the Eurasian Economic Union.
making nominal promises for assistance, all while Afghanistan remained unstable.

In an environment where PRC Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing stated that the main precondition for Chinese participation in Afghan reconstruction was domestic stability, it was surprising that the six member states of the SCO would demand that NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan set a schedule for winding down regional operations via a July 2005 joint communiqué at the 4th annual meeting of the SCO in Astana, Kazakhstan. As I have written elsewhere, the SCO in particular demanded a firm timetable for the withdrawal of all forces from Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan. This would have eliminated the last regional air field outside of Afghanistan, and, as a result, would have greatly curtailed the ability of NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan to complete its mission, if not ended it entirely.

Of the three main players, the actions of two were predictable. That the Russians would turn aggressively anti-NATO was not unexpected, as Russia had always tried and continues to want to have sole control over its near abroad, of which they consider Afghanistan to be part. For the United States to have military troops in Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet Republic, and in a near-abroad country was politically inconvenient, as it demonstrated continued weakness in post-Soviet foreign policy and made clear the limits of Russian power projection.

It was likewise not unexpected that Kyrgyzstan, with newly-installed President Kurmanbek Bakiev, who was facing internal opposition over the presence of NATO at Manas and who needed more money to justify a lease extension, would cut a deal with the United States and NATO to keep the troops in place. Both Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates write that the United States, while not fond of dealing with Bakiev, agreed to a rent increase in both 2005 and 2007 that, according to various reports, approached US$17.4 million annually, and US$60 million by 2009. Neither Russia nor China were willing to match that amount to keep the US out of Manas or to replace them there.

For China to make such a definitive stand was unexpected, however, not only because Afghanistan was far from stable, but also because China had traditionally been more cautious and pragmatic when crafting an Afghan policy. Moreover, as Clarke notes, the PRC has three main interests in and concerns about Afghanistan, two of which would require a long-term US/NATO presence: 1) ensuring the stability of Xinjiang by preventing the spread of terrorism, Islamism, and separatism – the ‘Three Evils’ – from Afghanistan; 2) developing commercial and economic links, including obtaining rights to natural resources; and 3) preventing the growing influence of India and the United States.
presence of the United States, either alone or through NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan helps to keep the first problem at bay and establishes enough stability to allow China to pursue the second. Only the third could be done if the United States were to leave; however, that would require China to play a much greater role, perhaps even militarily, in Afghanistan. China has shown no desire to do this.

The almost contradictory approach to Afghan affairs on the part of the PRC as evidenced in this SCO decision serves as a modern example of the history of Sino-Afghan relations: there is constant questioning on just how involved China should be in Afghanistan, unlike its involvement in both Central Asia and Africa, both of which have been rapidly increasing in the last decade.11 The reasons for this generally cautious approach are tied both to geography and regional history and to modern geopolitics.

This paper will present and examine the history of this generally cautious relationship since the inception of formal diplomatic relations between the People’s Republic of China and the Kingdom of Afghanistan in 1955. It will then turn to the post-9/11 years in order to examine the nature of the relationship in the context of NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan activities. Finally, on the cusp of the withdrawal of most remaining foreign troops, it will make the argument that, in the absence of continued heavy Western involvement, one regional country will have take the lead in the stabilization of Afghanistan, lest it once again descend into civil war, exporting terrorism beyond its borders, and that the country best positioned to do so is China.

Sino-Afghan Relations Before 9/11
Although there are indications of early contacts between the peoples of what would become the modern states of Afghanistan and China as seen through the transfer of religion, language, DNA, commerce, and trade, China has historically played a small role in Afghanistan.12 Prior to the creation of the PRC, issues of geography, regional history, and imperial geopolitics hindered potential relations. Sharing only a 75 km border of mountainous terrain since the installation of the Wakhan Corridor by the Russian and British Empires in the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention, this small and remote border made regular trade difficult. So did the British prohibition on Afghanistan having an independent foreign policy and a tenuous Chinese hold on Xinjiang following Qing Dynasty expansion. By the time that Afghanistan was able to conduct its own foreign policy after the Third Anglo-Afghan War (May–August 1919), Xinjiang itself became nominally independent, making it difficult for Republican
China to have any regular contacts with their neighbour. Not until 1949, when the Communists brought Xinjiang into the borders of modern China, could a formal relationship take hold. Nevertheless, it took an additional six years for diplomatic relations to be established. Although Afghanistan offered to recognize the new Chinese government in January 1950, China would not reciprocate and agree to accept formal recognition until 20 January 1955.13

From that point to this day, Sino-Afghan relations were influenced chiefly by geopolitical factors. In particular, the role of Afghanistan in Chinese foreign relations has always been secondary to Chinese interests in dealing with other regional countries, especially with Pakistan. Guang writes that ‘China has traditionally maintained friendly relations with Afghanistan, while Pakistan is a long-term ally of China.’14 China has needed a strong relationship with Pakistan as a hedge against India and therefore was willing to sacrifice any long-term alliance with Afghanistan if it would harm relations with Pakistan. This was especially true when Afghan nationalists raised the issue of ‘Pashtunistan,’ the idea of a unified Pashtun homeland.15

Complicating the issue was Pakistan’s decision to act much as the British before them. Pakistan used Pashtun tribesmen from both sides of the border during their 1948 battle with India over Kashmir and later tried to control internal Afghan politics for their own ends. Pakistan also regarded any Soviet influence as threatening their own, as an attempt to surround them with unfriendly states, and ultimately to invade and take them over, giving the Soviet Union (USSR) clear access to a warm-weather port. China would share these concerns, believing that Soviet encroachment into Afghanistan was likewise an attempt to isolate them and surround them with unfriendly states. Pakistan also regarded occasional Indian support for the Pashtunistan movement as part of this attempt to destroy Pakistan by making the border region unstable. By 1970, when it was clear that Soviet influence would not wane and that the Afghan government would continue to seek aid from them, especially after Mohammed Daoud’s 1973 coup, Pakistan set out to create anti-government Islamist opponents and to play an even greater role in trying to influence internal Afghan politics.16 It was at this time that Islamism would become a key political element in the region. Sponsored individuals included Ahmad Shah Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, both of whom would play key roles in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion and after.

It wasn’t only concerns about the USSR that led to the long-term Sino-Pakistan alliance; it was also Chinese concerns about India, itself allied with the USSR through the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation. The source
of this friction was China’s border disputes with India. The Sino-Indian border dispute arose after Indian independence in 1947 and Mao’s drive to bring Tibet under Chinese control in 1950. At issue was the location of the McMahon Line, agreed to by British India and Tibet as the official border between the two entities as laid out in the 1914 Simla Convention, and India’s historical and religious ties to Tibet. The Chinese regarded the latter as interference in its internal affairs, and they refused to accept this delineation as the boundary between the two nations. In 1954 India included this disputed territory on its maps and only later discovered Chinese-built roads in this very area, leading to border clashes and protests. Three wars between India and the PRC — the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the 1967 Chola incident, and the 1987 Sino-Indian skirmish — and India’s aforementioned alliance with the USSR brought China and Pakistan by necessity closer together. This included Chinese support for Pakistan in their 1965 and 1971 wars with India. However, this alliance would serve to complicate the Sino-Afghan relationship when Afghanistan and Pakistan were in disagreement, particularly over the Pashtun issue, and whenever Afghanistan would seek help from, work more closely with, or be provided aid by India; the latter issue is particularly relevant today.

It is only against this backdrop that Sino-Afghan relations should be examined. This history also helps to explain why initial twentieth-century Chinese contacts with Afghanistan were so few: China, which was slowly finding its way in the world and, until 1960, was itself closely allied with the USSR, was wary about becoming too involved in a region that could explode at any moment with its own allies at odds with each other. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai received an Afghan cultural delegation in Beijing in 1956, and he himself visited Kabul in 1957. Afghan Prime Minister Daoud visited Beijing in 1959, a visit that led to a communiqué stating that cooperation between the nations should be expanded. King Zahir Shah visited Beijing in 1964, a visit that was preceded in 1963 by a finalized border agreement between the two nations. This agreement came as China faced growing conflict with India over border issues. Zhou Enlai returned to Afghanistan to sign a Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Nonaggression after border talks with Jawaharlal Nehru in India failed. It was the Sino-Soviet split and the Sino-Indian border disputes that coloured the Sino-Afghan relationship in the 1960s. China could not afford to alienate Pakistan by supporting Afghanistan too closely when the two were at odds because China itself was facing threats from two directions: from the USSR and from India. Pakistan was clearly stronger than Afghanistan, which itself would choose to
work more closely with India during times of Afghan-Pakistan struggles, and could help to draw India’s attention away from China.

From the mid-1960s forward, PRC involvement in Afghanistan expanded only modestly. China loaned Afghanistan US$28.5 million in 1964, an amount that would increase to US$44 million in 1972. This money was invested in industry projects including textile and paper mills. Chinese Head of State Liu Shaoqi visited Afghanistan in April 1966 on a ‘friendly visit’ and returned in April 1972, but American analysts believed that the second visit simply signaled a determination to keep the Sino-Afghan relationship on a positive footing, as no outcome was announced. The Chinese also completed the Parwan Irrigation Project in 1976. While these projects and investment amounts paled in comparison to American and Soviet investment—the United States, for example, sent teachers from the University of Wyoming and Columbia University, built roads from Kandahar to Kabul and from Herat to the Iranian border, founded Ariana Airlines with the assistance of Pan Am, and built an international airport in Kandahar, all of which culminated in a half-day visit by President Eisenhower in 1959—it did allow China a stage on which to show the world that they were a growing player in the world and could serve as an alternative ally, particularly to those third-world nations looking for a different socialist-communist model than the USSR. This was an international movement that accelerated after the 1955 Bandung Conference.

The Chinese became concerned about the state of their relationship with Afghanistan after the 1973 Saur Revolution in which Daoud overthrew Zahir Shah in a coup. Daoud had been responsible for Afghanistan’s close relationship with the USSR in the 1950s, and China feared that he would again move in that direction. Moreover, China was worried that Daoud would again raise the issue of Pashtunistan, as he had when serving as Prime Minister in the 1950s. If the issue spilled into Pakistan, itself still weak from their 1971 war with India, this could make Soviet expansion toward Pakistan easier, which would, in turn, weaken Chinese regional interests. This fear ended up being unfounded, as Daoud’s foreign policy was more pragmatic. For example, he sent his brother, Naim Khan, to Beijing to meet with Zhou Enlai and continued to receive aid from the United States. His visit to Beijing resulted in a US$55 million loan to be directed toward further development projects, and relations remained on a friendly footing until the Afghan Communist Party takeover of Afghanistan on 27 April 1978.

Chinese worries of deeper Soviet involvement in Afghanistan became real in December 1979 when the USSR launched an invasion of Afghanistan to prop
up the rapidly failing government of the Afghan Communist Party. Fears of a continued Soviet desire for a warm weather port resurfaced, as did concerns that the USSR still had the goal of surrounding them with unfriendly governments. Therefore, as explained below, China made the decision to join the alliance that supported the mujahedin inside of Afghanistan. This also gave them an opportunity both to support Pakistan and to work more closely with the United States, furthering a relationship that had started with President Richard Nixon’s 1972 trip to China.

After a series of high-level highly visible visits between the two nations, China allowed the United States to construct listening posts in Qitai and Korla in Xinjiang in 1980. The Chinese, trained and supervised by Americans, ran these posts. The two nations gathered and shared intelligence on Soviet rocket telemetry across the border in the Kazakh SSR and on Soviet activities in Afghanistan. There are also claims that CIA Director Stansfield Turner convinced the Chinese to recruit mujahedin from Xinjiang’s Uyghur population and to establish mujahedin camps in western China, where they were trained and armed. The second major contribution was providing money and arms. Along with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states, China contributed to an amount that totaled US$100 million in the mid-1980s. Furthermore, China itself produced Soviet-style weapons for use in Afghanistan. Ambassador Peter Tomsen recollects that ‘whole factories owned and run by the Chinese military were switched over to producing Soviet-type AK-47s, RPGs, and 122-mm rocket launchers.’

Ultimately this alliance was successful, and the USSR pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989, collapsing just two years later. However, China, like the other supporters of the mujahedin, almost immediately turned away from Afghanistan and toward other affairs. It could be plausibly argued that this failure on everyone’s part to remain involved in Afghanistan and to rebuild it at that time, rather than neglecting it and allowing it to become a failed state, enabled the events of 11 September 2001 as well as the rise of Islamism throughout the world, which China asserts affects it adversely in Xinjiang.

The Post-9/11 Sino-Afghan Relationship
At the time of 9/11 China was much stronger than it had been in years prior, and people were already talking about an ‘Asian Century,’ which a rising China would lead, or even possibly a ‘Chinese Century.’ China had formed a regional
organization, the aforementioned Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in June 2001 from the original Shanghai-5 Group, itself formed in 1996 to resolve post-Soviet era border disputes with the newly independent Central Asian Republics. There was, therefore, a regional infrastructure through which China could have acted, either alone or in concert with its allies in the area. However, China chose to remain on the sidelines despite the fact that threats they claimed to be facing in Xinjiang were quite apparent right across the small, mountainous border.

China, like much of the rest of the world, was quick to agree that the United States had the right to respond to the attacks of 9/11; however, it found itself in a difficult and potentially contradictory situation. China had no desire to see an Islamist government remain in power in Afghanistan, in particular one that had been training foreign fighters, including, according to observers, Uyghurs associated with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, but they were unwilling to do anything in Afghanistan themselves. On the other hand, it had no desire to see the United States move into the region for an indefinite period of time. However, they did not have the influence with the Eurasian states that Russia had, and, as Russia had already given its tacit blessing for Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to host US troops, China saw no advantage to opposing a US presence and subsequent actions. Instead, China pressed for a multi-national coalition to enter Afghanistan, rather than having the US act alone. This is what happened with the creation of NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan, led by the United States and Great Britain.  

China’s initial contribution was to convince Pakistan to support the NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan mission, although they were rightly concerned that a long-term Western presence in Afghanistan would lead to an increasingly unstable Afghanistan, as the foreign presence became less and less popular, a fact true throughout Afghan history. Moreover, they saw a related danger for Pakistan. Pakistani governments, which have looked and leaned toward the West for support and aid, were increasingly challenged by a population that leaned against the West and toward tribal identities and militant Islam. This could potentially make their key regional ally more unstable if not tear it entirely asunder. China again had to perform a balancing act.

China’s support of US actions was also designed to ensure that their relationship would improve, easing any further threats of economic sanctions, for sanctions could slow the growing Chinese economy and, in turn, risk internal stability there. Likewise, as with Russia and the Chechens, China saw their support of America’s ‘War on Terror’ as allowing them to deal with the Uyghur population in Xinjiang as they wished. Indeed, the United States placed the East
Turkestan Islamic Movement on the list of terrorist organizations and had been relatively quiet about Chinese actions in Xinjiang, at least until recently. Al Qaeda’s Abu Yahia Al-Libi did the Uyghurs no favours in this regard when he proclaimed on 7 October 2009 that they should prepare for a holy war against the Chinese government.\(^{35}\)

As in other periods of their 60-year relationship China took its time before financially investing in Afghanistan. They limited themselves to a US$4 million pledge in humanitarian aid in 2001 and pledged an additional US$1 million in reconstruction aid at the January 2002 Tokyo Donors Conference.\(^{36}\) They also joined Afghanistan’s five other border countries, the original 6 in the 6 + 2 Group, in signing a 22 December 2002 non-interference pact, the Kabul Declaration.\(^{37}\) This pact included a section on drug trafficking over the Afghan border, but it was only at the Berlin Donors Conference two years later, on 7 April 2004, that the six countries signed the Berlin Statement, a regional cooperation agreement to aid in the fight against the narcotics trade.\(^{38}\)

An additional US$150 million pledge was later forthcoming, although little of this has appeared, despite Foreign Minister Li’s assertions to the contrary during his 4 April 2005 visit to Afghanistan.\(^{39}\) China also provided tactical military support to the NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan forces and remained publically silent about their regional strategic concerns stemming from the increased presence of US and NATO forces in the Central Asian Republics and the growing regional influence of India. With such geopolitical uncertainty, the March 2010 Sino-Afghan agreement may be intentionally vague: commitment of economic cooperation, technical training, and tariff reductions, along with a mutual desire for regional security and economic stability are stated, but no dollar amounts were published.\(^{40}\) There are estimates that the total amount of Chinese donor monies to Afghanistan between 2002 and 2010 totaled US$205.3 million.\(^{41}\) During newly-elected Afghan President Ashraf Ghani’s visit on 31 October 2014 to China, PRC Premier Li Keqiang pledged an additional US$244 million in aid in the next three years, as well as offering training programs and academic scholarships.\(^{42}\)

China’s first projects in Afghanistan were in infrastructure construction and reconstruction. ZTE and Huawei worked to implement digital telephone switches in Kabul with a capacity of 200,000 lines.\(^{43}\) The speed with which this was completed lends credence to the accusation that they were working on such a project under Taliban rule.\(^{44}\) Chinese companies were hired by the European Union (EU) to reconstruct roads, and they also restored hospitals in Kabul and Kandahar. Finally, they participated in the Parwan irrigation project in Parwar province;\(^{45}\) advising on dam construction in this region is something the Chinese
had likewise been accused of doing during Taliban rule. They constructed this project in the 1970s, so their interest in and ability to work there is clear.

China’s continuing reticence to get too deeply involved in Afghanistan stems, in part, from the events of 10 June 2004. Eleven Chinese workers, most employed by the China Shisigu Railway Group, a company hired for road construction projects in the Jalagir region of Konduz Province, were attacked in their compound and killed by twenty alleged Taliban.\(^46\) China responded by asking the Afghan Transitional Administration to provide security at such Chinese construction sites in the future, something the Afghans were not yet able to do. Regional security was provided by NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan, at times in conjunction with Afghan authorities whom they were training. Who was ultimately responsible for this action, and there is much debate on that still today, belies the key point: unlike other countries who have faced such attacks and, in response, have provided their own security, China did not. All of the Chinese infrastructure work was done under the NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan umbrella, meaning, in essence, that the US has been protecting Chinese interests and actions inside of Afghanistan. China is unwilling to provide their own troops not only because of a long-standing policy against foreign deployment but also for fear of looking like they are fighting Islam. Such an image could increase the likelihood of a worsening situation in Xinjiang. At the same time, though, they state the need for a stable, non-Islamist Afghanistan to keep Xinjiang from becoming increasingly unstable.\(^47\)

Until 2007, therefore, Chinese investment, however tepid, was directed toward stabilizing the country with the hope that a secure Afghanistan would no longer train or export terrorists to Xinjiang. From that time forward, however, China redirected their emphasis and invested in projects that would serve their own economic rise by pursuing contracts for natural resources, trade, and economic matters. In 2007, China’s state-owned China Metallurgical Group Corporation (CMGC) won a record 30-year US$3.5 billion deal, at least US$1 billion more than the next closest bid, for exclusive rights to the Mes Aynak copper field in Logar Province.\(^48\) The official bid and contract have never been released, and the Afghan Parliament has not formally approved the contract. Moreover, the entire process has been overshadowed by accusations of bribery to the then Afghan Minister of Mines Mohammad Ibrahim Adel in the amount of US$30 million.\(^49\) Officially the bid was awarded to China because the Chinese promised to start work immediately.\(^50\) This has not happened.

The Mes Aynak field, discovered in 1974 and surveyed in 1979 by Soviet geologists, but never developed, is thought to hold US$88 billion in copper
reserves, depending on the market price of copper, and will contribute between US$250 and US$500 million per year in taxes paid to Afghanistan by China. That China had been seeking such deals for some time is not unexpected, as they had been in discussions for obtaining natural resources since at least 2003. At that time, though, they had been too concerned about the security situation to pursue them aggressively. On 24 February of that year a senior Chinese businessman from the CMGC, the same company that won the Mes Aynak bid, was killed in a plane crash along with Afghan Minister of Mines and Industry Joma Mohammad Mohammadi and four other officials. Although the stated topic of their discussions was the construction of a transit pipeline for natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan, it is plausible that they were discussing other Chinese projects, including the Mes Aynak copper field, as its existence had been known for decades.

In spite of the agreement, finding, extracting, and exporting the expected amount of copper is not certain. More than a year passed from the signing to the opening ceremonies, and there is still not sufficient infrastructure to move the copper to China. As part of the deal, China agreed to build a freight railroad from Xinjiang through Tajikistan and on to Pakistan as well as to construct a 400 megawatt coal-fired power plant. Neither of these have been done. Then there are potential environmental costs. Initially the project had substantial local support because it promised upwards of 12,000 direct new jobs, with an additional 62,500 ‘induced’ jobs, few of which have appeared. Balancing this, however, would be a loss of traditionally held land and, with China’s reputation for environmental disasters, a chance of severe ecological damage that could have long-ranging adverse health effects. Afghanistan did successfully force the CMGC to relocate its tailings dumping site out of fears that the location could pollute a local river.

China asserts that a lack of security and the continued presence of Soviet-era land mines are the reasons for slow development. Estimates in 2012 stated that work would likely not begin until 2014. While the Soviets themselves had never felt secure enough to attempt to excavate Mes Aynak, the location of the copper field is relatively safe today. However, the lands through which railroad and power lines must travel are not stable, and there is a chance that insurgency forces could disrupt the infrastructure. It does not seem likely that China will provide its own security forces, despite rumors of a possible deal to do so in 2008 as well as a commitment to open a transport road through the Wakhan Corridor. They would instead remain reliant upon any remaining NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan forces or local Afghan security support, something that the Afghan
forces may be unable to do. This also contributes to the politically inconvenient notion that China is freeloader in Afghanistan. They may be counting on their long relationship as Pakistan’s ally to keep the Taliban at bay, but considering the increasing lack of control that Pakistan has over the Taliban, this cannot be ensured.

Now in 2014 with the project more than five years behind schedule, the CMGC is asking to renegotiate the contract, citing a new set of problems. There is an archeological dig, sponsored by the World Bank and employing over 400 Afghans, attempting to recover ancient ruins and 1000-year old statues of Buddha and other figures. Ironically the continued delays have given archeologists more time to complete their work and catalog their finds. Land mines continue to be a danger, as they have not yet been cleared, and phosphates, which are used in the copper smelting process, have not been found in ample supply. The CMGC has suggested taking the copper ore back to China, a demand that Afghanistan has not been quick to endorse, as it would cost the region and the country much-needed jobs, despite the promise that the CMGC would hire locals to construct the necessary roads. Finally a 33% drop in market copper prices since 2011 has led to a request to reduce the amount of royalties paid.

The lack of Chinese speed in fulfilling their part of the contract has, ironically, had unintended benefits to Afghanistan despite the loss of revenue. The delay has allowed outside mining experts to develop and implement programs that will allow the Afghan Mining Ministry to better negotiate and carry out deals in the future. In addition, the World Bank has given US$92 million to support sustainable mining, while USAID has started a program titled Mining Investment and Development for Afghan Sustainability. Both programs are designed to strengthen Afghanistan’s mining sector. The result of this delay, therefore, may be a stronger Mining (and, in time, other natural resources) Ministry, which will be better positioned to stand up to China and other foreign investors, making it more difficult to pursue one-sided deals that are not moved toward completion.

In the meantime, China is pursuing other natural resource opportunities within Afghanistan. A December 2011 announcement stated that the Afghan government had signed a US$700 million deal with China’s National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) to explore oil and natural gas reserves in Sar-e Pul and Faryab in the north-central part of the country for which the Afghan government will receive 70% of the profits. Limited oil production began in October 2012.
but halted less than a year later because there was no transit agreement to allow it to be exported for refinement.62 Talks on this issue continue.

It is expected that the Chinese will make further moves toward as yet unexplored iron ore and gold reserves, which evidence indicates Afghanistan possesses in large quantity. This includes newly-found resources in the Mes Aynak region, where geologists continue to make new discoveries. The World Bank estimates that there may be nearly US$1 trillion worth of natural resources throughout Afghanistan.63 China or its companies, however, may not be as well positioned to obtain these contracts given their history with the copper mine and the fact that their failure thus far to construct a railway has put a US$10.8 billion Afghan deal with India to mine iron in danger of failing.64 This could cause Afghanistan to look toward India itself or other nations for future infrastructure development.

The Future of Sino-Afghan Relations

Richard Weitz, Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, asserts that China may be best positioned to work with the Taliban should they return to power after NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan pulls out in 2014.65 He backs his claim with two points: if the Taliban were to assure China that they would not train Uyghur separatists or allow them to operate from their territory and if Afghanistan was to allow continued Chinese infrastructure investment, the PRC would be able to work with the government in a way that neither the United States or Russia could. China likely hoped that Pakistan could be the key link in this relationship, given the history of the ISI with the Taliban and China’s long history with Pakistan;66 however, the events of 16 December 2014, when Pakistani Taliban assailants attacked and massacred 145 at a school in Peshawar show that the Pakistan-Taliban relationship no longer exists.67 Likewise, recent actions by Afghani Taliban, including bombings inside of Kabul68 and control of regional districts, such as the Tagab District in Kapisa Province, only an hour outside of Kabul have given the Chinese cause for concern that Pakistan is no longer willing or, more likely, is no longer able to have influence over the Afghan Taliban.69 This has also caused the Afghan government to look to increase their engagement with China, as they feel they too cannot count on Pakistan to work to control the Taliban.70

Pakistan, though, also has a related interest in a stable Afghanistan: they need a China that can safely work there, but the amount of instability they have been willing to tolerate and, some would argue, instigate, both in the cross-border region and deep within Afghanistan hinders this. Since 2002 China has
been constructing a large port at Gwadar, which, although owned by the Pakistani government, is run by the China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC). This port is particularly well positioned for the shipping of goods that have traveled overland from Central Asia and western China and for which Pakistan could collect transit duty. However, nearly all of the Central Asian goods would need to travel through Afghanistan, where success will depend upon the ability of those working inside of Afghanistan to provide security and stability for the regions in which they work and transit.\textsuperscript{71} China itself has recently started to insist that Pakistan crack down on Uyghurs studying in radical madrassas in Pakistan, and, as far back as 2011, began to blame Pakistan publically for at least some of the insurgency.\textsuperscript{72} This amount of displeasure with its long-term ally, though, comes at some risk, but so far Pakistan has complied with Chinese requests by extraditing Uyghur activists back to China.\textsuperscript{73} This is one sign that China is attempting to take a more active role in Afghanistan; as before 9/11, China had been content to let Afghan relations take a backseat to their relations with Pakistan and its army. This would seem to be a strong break with that policy.

With the withdrawal of NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan forces, the six neighboring countries may be forced to step up and provide security, if not within Afghanistan itself, then certainly on their own mutual borders; after all, they have the most immediate concerns with regard both to potential terrorism and to potential refugee problems, both of which we have seen in Pakistan for decades. As US influence wanes, so will the US ability to keep the region stable. Uzbek President Islam Karimov had suggested at the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest that the original 6 + 2 Group should be restarted as the 6 + 3 Group, which would include a role for NATO, but under the aegis of the UN.\textsuperscript{74} The other possibility, which might be more amenable to China, would be to establish a larger role for the SCO.

Arguing for an increased SCO presence, Zhao Huasheng, writing for the Carnegie Moscow Center, notes that ‘the SCO possesses considerable potential to aid Afghanistan, particularly in the economic and humanitarian spheres. The SCO must find a decision how [sic] to realize its potential in a more effective way.’\textsuperscript{75} This assumes, however, that the SCO will be able to decide what its ultimate role and function are both within Afghanistan and within the greater Eurasian sphere. Chinese President Xi Jinping has stated that the SCO must ‘focus on combating religion-involved extremism and internet terrorism,’\textsuperscript{76} while Russia has long desired the SCO become a group of energy producers to rival OPEC. There is no consensus among the nations as to how to deal with
Afghanistan, and the addition of more countries, including one democracy, India, could make coming to a consensus more challenging. The SCO has no military capability, its ability to provide enough financial assistance to make a significant difference is quite limited, and its infrastructure for dealing with humanitarian, especially refugee issues, is non-existent. How Afghanistan will, therefore, ‘become an independent, neutral, peaceful, and prosperous country’ that the SCO wishes it to become is unclear. As border nations, the SCO member states are the ones most immediately affected both economically and with regard to border and internal security via spill-over terrorism, and therefore they will need to take the lead.

The proposed expansion of the SCO to include India, Pakistan, and Iran, would mean that all nations bordering Afghanistan would be member states. This would be another advantage to utilizing available SCO mechanisms. Moreover, if the United States were to be included in an SCO + 1 Group, the SCO as a whole, could together counter any threats to regional hegemony that they saw coming from the United States, while allowing the US to provide the stability that seemingly only they have the ability to provide. This may be one reason that China has proposed trilateral talks between themselves, the United States, and Afghanistan; traditionally, China prefers the status quo, and here they would like for the United States to continue to provide security, while they concentrated on their quest for natural resources. There is another reason that China would prefer one or the other of these two strategies: the former would contain a rising India within the SCO, while the latter might be able to exclude them altogether.

Now that both nations are nuclear powers, China and India have made a concerted effort to get along with each other. Nevertheless, tensions remain over regional hegemony and access to natural resources. These tensions are only likely to increase as India works more closely with the United States in Afghanistan and now as China takes over operations at Gwadar. Located near the entrance to the Persian Gulf, this port gives China access to those shipping lanes as well as providing a place for Chinese ships to dock when in the Arabian Sea. The latter is clearly designed to stem Indian naval growth in the region.

India itself has been playing a growing role within Afghanistan in recent years, a fact that has caused concern in neighboring Pakistan as well as in China. The long-lasting struggle between Pakistan and India for regional hegemony means that each regards the actions of the other within Afghanistan with great suspicion. Pakistan sees India’s actions as trying to curtail its influence within Afghanistan; China, which, as presented above, based much of its early alliance
with Pakistan on concerns over India’s relationship with the Soviet Union, sees India’s actions not only as an attempt to curtail Pakistan’s influence within Afghanistan but their own as well. India in the long run would seem to have an advantage over both Pakistan and China: they are actively investing in Afghan infrastructure and, through soft power, including the popularity of Bollywood films and TV shows, which, as pure entertainment are devoid of government propaganda, has given India an overall very positive rating in Afghanistan.80

Since 9/11, India has provided approximately US$2 billion in infrastructure projects or other forms of investment.81 In January 2009 India completed construction on a major road from Delaram to Zaranj in Nimroz Province, which has made it easier for goods to travel from Iran’s Chabahar port into Afghanistan. This has also allowed India and other nations a way to bypass Pakistan when moving goods into Afghanistan, making Afghanistan’s economy less dependent upon Pakistani good will. India, for example, can receive goods through Afghanistan and Pakistan duty free, but it cannot ship them out to Afghanistan in this fashion, making them more expensive on the other end.82 In January 2010, India announced that they would invest in faculty and student development, offering 100 fellowships for Master’s and Doctoral programs for current faculty members, with another 200 scholarships for recent graduates each year for five years.83 This program likely led China to announce their own scholarship program for Afghan students late last year.

India is also likely to invest in smaller, grass roots projects. Speaking in May 2012 Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmai Rassoul indicated his hope that small and mid-sized Indian businesses would establish themselves in Afghanistan.84 Because of its own experiences, India is also best positioned to help Afghanistan further democracy, particularly at the local levels, and in a way that doesn’t seem threatening.85 India’s interests in this in clear: as Henry Kissinger noted, ‘In many respects India will be the most affected country if a jihadist Islamism gains impetus in Afghanistan.’86 Local projects, in combination with soft power, will it is hoped, help to stave off a resurgence of Islamism. It also hasn’t gone unnoticed that, unlike China, India sent its own paramilitary force to protect its workers inside of Afghanistan.87 Neither Pakistan nor China has offered anything along this fashion: China provides no security apparatus, relying on NATO, and has invested for its own interests, while Pakistan is often seen as an agent of destabilization. Thus, both because of its actions and because of who it is not, India is increasingly seen as a positive force for and within Afghanistan by the Afghans themselves.
It is clear that in any post-NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan Afghanistan, China will no longer be able to maintain the low profile positions that it has taken thus far. Rather, it will have to rise up to play a much larger and more active role if Afghanistan is going to become stable economically, politically, and militarily, for an unstable Afghanistan would see a new proliferation of the ‘Three Evils,’ once again threatening its neighbors. One country will have to take the lead in this, and China is arguably best positioned to do so, unless it wants to leave that role to India, which could quickly place China at the margins. For itself, Afghanistan wants as many outside forces to play a positive role as possible. President Ghani has already reached out to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey to help construct the Lapis Lazuli Corridor.88 He wants to see continuing aid from the United States, China, India, and Iran, and he also wants Pakistan to play a more positive role and put aside its antagonism with India for the greater goal of Afghan stability. Ghani’s role in bringing together Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for a handshake at the SAARC Conference in Nepal is a step in this direction.89 Peaceful coexistence between Pakistan and India, at least as it concerns stabilizing Afghanistan, could also start to sideline China. In this context, then, the questions that remain are what role will China play and what role does China ultimately want to play in the future of Afghanistan.

NOTES

1 The text and an explanation of Article 5 can be found here: <http://www.nato.int/terrorism/five.htm>, accessed 11 October 2014.


3 The 6 + 2 Group consisted of the six countries bordering Afghanistan: China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, plus Russia and the United States.

4 Information about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can be found here: http://www.sectSCO.org/EN123/. The members of the SCO are: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Until the Andijan massacre on 13 May 2005, the United States had forces at the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan. The US was asked to leave within six months on 29 July 2005; it pulled out in November of that year.<ref>http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4457844.stm</ref>, accessed 13 October 2014.


The idea of ‘Pashtunistan’ arises from two imperial decisions. First, the imposition of the Durand Line in 1893 split the traditional Pashtun lands between British India and Afghanistan. Second, during independence, the Pashtun area within British India was allowed to join either India or Pakistan, but it was prevented from joining Afghanistan and, hence, bringing together a the majority of the Pashtun people. Afghan politicians often raise the matter when they need a foreign policy issue to rally the country.


33 Detailed information on NATO/ISAF-Afghanistan, including a mission/mandate statement, can be found at <http://www.aco.nato.int/page20844847.aspx>, accessed 2 March 2013.

34 Signs of this increasing instability can be seen in the recent influx of refugees from border regions of Pakistan into Afghanistan: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/world/in-shift-pakistaniis-fleeing-war-flow-into-beleaguered-afghanistan.html?_r=0>, accessed 17 November 2014.


44 On 28 September 2001, Bill Gertz, writing in the *Washington Times* a story, ‘Chinese firms helping put phone system in Kabul,’ that would later be advanced by others, announced that two Chinese companies, Zhongxing Telecom (ZTE) and Huawei Technologies, both headquartered in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, had been operating in Afghanistan for the previous two years. If true, and this assertion remains both controversial and unproven, this demonstrates a China that was willing to be active abroad in order to further its own economic interests, even if it meant working with a national government most refused to recognize.


Price, ‘Delay in mine project shadows hopes of Afghan economy’.

Price, ‘Delay in mine project shadows hopes of Afghan economy’.


Caulderwood, ‘China and Afghanistan’s minerals’.

O’Donnell, ‘China’s MCC turns back on US$3b Mes Aynak Afghanistan mine deal’.


Haqqani, Between Mosque and Military, pp. 239–240.


Hussain Haqqani notes that Pakistani trucking interests sought Taliban help in clearing access to Central Asia through Afghanistan, paying the Taliban to clear the roads of chains and bandits and to guarantee security for transit shipping near the beginning of Taliban rule. I would note
that much the same type of security guarantees are needed today; this time, though, it is to protect against resurgent Taliban forces. See Haqqani, *Between Mosque and Military*, p. 240.


73 Ibid.


77 Zhao, *China and Afghanistan*, p. 13.

78 Khalizad, ‘Why Afghanistan courts China’.


83 Ibid.


87 Bajoria, ‘India-Afghanistan Relations’.
