

The US Withdrawal and One Belt One Road: Chinese Concerns and Challenges in Afghanistan

Wang Jin

After 2001, when international forces led by the United States toppled the Taliban government, Afghanistan was viewed by China as a US military base that could threaten western China. However, when in 2011 the US announced the gradual withdrawal of its military forces from Afghanistan, China's major security threats evolved from conventional US military threats into nonconventional threats such as Islamic extremism and the spillover of instability. Meanwhile, guided by the One Belt One Road initiative put forward by Chinese President Xi Jinping, China began to increase its economic investment in Afghanistan. China's concerns about the security implications related to its economic presence in Afghanistan are drawing it into increasingly active efforts to help forge a political settlement.

Chinese Concerns in Afghanistan

Geographically, China is connected to Afghanistan by a narrow corridor with a border of only 97 km. Despite the limited physical connection, however, the history of communication between China and Afghanistan has continued for more than two thousand years. The ancient cities of Afghanistan such as Herat and Kabul were of great commercial and strategic importance in China's Silk Road. Afghanistan also served as an important traffic hub for religious expansion from South Asia to China, and both Buddhism and Islam were transferred from South Asia and the Middle East to China through Afghanistan. Buddhism moved from ancient India to China via Afghanistan in the first century, and the famous ancient Chinese monk

Wang Jin is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science, International Division, at the University of Haifa.

Xuan Zang traveled from China to India through Afghanistan in a pilgrimage for Buddhist scriptures early in the seventh century. In his book *Records of the Western Region* (*da tang xi yu ji*), Xuan Zang recorded the grand sight of the famous Baghramyān Buddha in Afghanistan.¹ Similarly, Chinese Muslims in western China share much with Afghan Muslims in terms of culture, customs, and religious practice.

The energy resources in Afghanistan consist primarily of natural gas and petroleum. In June 2009, China and Afghanistan signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in minerals. In 2007, in a joint foreign investment of \$4.4 billion, the Metallurgical Cooperation of China (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation (JCCL) won a tender to develop the copper deposit at Aynak in Logar Province southeast of Kabul. The Aynak project includes a thermal power plant, a phosphate fertilizer plant, and support facilities such as schools, hospitals, and mosques. The planned construction cycle was five years, at a total investment of more than \$10 billion.² In 2011, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Afghan Watan Oil

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and Gas obtained the rights to three oil blocks of the Amu Darya basin located in the provinces of Sari-i-Pul and Faryab in northwestern Afghanistan.³ More than \$2.5 billion dollars were invested by CNPC and Afghan Watan Oil and Gas, and the Amu Darya basin was the first oil plantation project in Afghanistan since 2001. Once constructed, the project is expected to provide the Afghanistan government nearly \$7 billion over the next 25 years. China believes these two projects “are the two largest foreign investments and will be viewed as examples of China-Afghanistan friendship.”⁴

China also hopes to strengthen its economic ties with Afghanistan, and believes the economic development would stabilize the Afghanistan political order.⁵ Since the Taliban government fell in 2001, China has actively participated in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. It has agreed to forgive Afghanistan's debt and has provided nearly \$200

million in aid.⁶ Several important infrastructure projects are supported by China in Afghanistan, such as the Parwan irrigation projects, Kunduz highway project (nearly 232 km), Kabul Republic Hospital project, a network

capacity enlargement project in Kabul and neighboring provinces, and the highway project from Kabul to Jalalabad. In 2013, to stimulate Afghan-Chinese bilateral trade, China decided to entitle 95 percent of Afghan imports to zero tariff status.⁷ By late 2015, Chinese construction companies signed construction contracts for a total of \$898 million with Afghanistan partners, while the bilateral trade volume reached \$376 million (table 1).⁸

Table 1. Trade Volume between China and Afghanistan, 2003-14

Year	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14
Volume (\$ million)	27	58	53	100	171	154	215	715	234	469	337	410

Source: China Commerce Ministry (for 2003-9); Afghanistan Central Bureau of Statistics (for 2010); China Central Bureau of Statistics (for 2011-14)

For a long time, Chinese political decision makers viewed Afghanistan as a peripheral state and gave it little strategic attention. Relations with Afghanistan were seen as of secondary importance. Afghanistan became an issue of “strategic salience” for China only when it was perceived as a clear security threat.⁹ After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1980, China actively supported the Afghan rebellion groups to resist the Soviet army in Afghanistan. More recently, China has two main security concerns regarding Afghanistan: the first concern is geopolitical, namely, that the United States might establish permanent bases in Afghanistan, from where the depopulated western China could be threatened.

The second concern regards terrorism. After the Soviet withdrawal and the Islamic Taliban expansion in Afghanistan in 1990s, China worried that the rise of the Taliban could radicalize Xinjiang, home to many members of the Uyghur Muslim minority. Particularly given the cultural and ethnic differences from inner China, Xinjiang is vulnerable to the terrorism and extremism from Afghanistan. Chinese scholars believe that the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) was supported by the Taliban regime and was permitted to set up training camps in Afghanistan from the mid-1990s to 2001.¹⁰ Uyghur terrorists associated with ETIM have planned waves of terrorism attacks in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, terrorist attacks

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extend to cities outside Xinjiang, seriously affecting not only Xinjiang's stability and security, but also that of China as a whole.¹¹ Chinese scholars believe that if the civil war lasts, Afghanistan will continue to be a haven for terrorism and extremism, and a possible source of terrorism spillover to Xinjiang and elsewhere in China. Against this backdrop, the importance of Afghanistan to China's national security has increased.

China's Afghanistan Policy after 2012

Traditionally, Beijing maintained a low profile on Afghanistan largely because of China's lack of geopolitical influence in Central Asia. Since President Obama announced his plan for a drawdown of US forces in 2011, the geopolitical threat from United States to China has steadily receded. Meanwhile, President Xi Jinping launched the One Belt One Road initiative in 2013, in the hope of encouraging new trade and connectivity throughout Asia with land and maritime links to Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.¹² According to Xi, "With our national power continuously strengthened, China will shoulder more international responsibility and undertake more international obligations. China will make a greater contribution to the peaceful development of mankind."¹³ Under the One Belt One Road initiative, and given the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, China hopes, with its special constructive role, to help maintain stability and security in Afghanistan.

First, the Chinese government's policy highlights the political trust between China and Afghanistan. After Xi assumed power in late 2012, China's new leadership began to direct more political attention to Afghanistan and strengthen the political ties with the Afghanistan government within the One Belt One Road framework. In July 2014, China appointed former Ambassador Sun Yuxi Special Envoy for Afghanistan Affairs, joining other special envoys, such as for Korea Affairs, Africa Affairs, and Middle East Affairs. China also became the first official visit destination of Ashraf Ghani after he assumed Afghanistan's presidency. In November 2014, China's newly appointed Minister of Public Security and State Councilor Guo Shengkun visited Afghanistan, where he discussed bilateral cooperation in political and intelligence matters to crack down on terrorist activities. That same month, Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Deputy Chief of Staff Qi Jianguo visited Afghanistan as President Xi Jinping's special envoy. In February 2016 General Fang Fenghui, the chief of the Joint Staff of the Central Military Commission, visited Afghanistan. Guo Shengkun, Qi

Jianguo, and Fang Fenghui are intimate associates of President Xi Jinping. Such a series of visits by high ranking diplomatic, security, and defense officials clearly indicates the increasing political importance of Afghanistan for China.

Second, through aid offered to Afghanistan and with Afghanistan encouraged to join international organizations, China tries to keep the Afghan government stable. During an international conference in Beijing in October 2014 as part of the Istanbul process (the “Heart of Asia” process), Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang stressed the “new era” in China-Afghan relations by establishing a “strategic and cooperative partnership.” Between 2001 and 2013, China provided a total of nearly \$250 million in humanitarian aid, and trained more than 1000 professionals. In 2014 alone, China provided \$75 million of humanitarian aid, and promised to provide another \$330 million over the next three years.¹⁴ China also promised to train 3,000 Afghan professionals and provide 500 scholarships for Afghan students from 2015 to 2019, and it actively participated in training professional personnel for Afghanistan in the hope of enhancing Afghan governance capability.¹⁵ At the same time, China invites various Afghan art organizations and groups to participate in different cultural activities held in China. China also offers Afghan youth different kinds of scholarships to study in China.

Economically, China provides economic investments to various states, including Afghanistan, through different regional organizations and international organizations formed and led by China. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was officially established in June 2015 in Beijing with 57 prospective founding members and \$100 billion in authorized capital, was viewed by China as an important tool to “reform the existing international system.”¹⁶ In parallel to the AIIB initiative, in November 2014 the Chinese government announced that it would provide \$40 billion to establish the Silk Road Fund (SRF) in order to support financing for the construction of One Belt One Road. SRF is different from AIIB in that it is organized and operated solely by China.

China also encourages Afghanistan to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO, which was established in 2001, has become a political, economic and military group that includes China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The SCO has served as a regional mechanism to combat terrorism, secessionism, and extremism in Central Asia. In the SCO conference in China in December of 2015, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang spoke to Afghanistan Chief Executive

Officer Abdullah Abdullah: “We believe, as we expand our member states, observer states and dialogue partners...there will be broader prospects for SCO development.”¹⁷

Third, China tries to act as a mediator in the peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. China advocates a peace process that is an “‘Afghan-led and Afghan-owned’ process toward peace and reconciliation”;¹⁸ China believes it is in a good position to undertake such mediation, because China has a relatively good political image in Afghanistan, as it consistently promotes Afghan-led and Afghan-owned policy, respects the country’s independence and sovereignty, and actively promotes political reconciliation there. Furthermore, China did not participate in the Afghan war in 2001, has not aroused the dislike of any political faction, and is relatively accepted by all parties in Afghanistan.¹⁹ Another point in China’s favor is that China maintains good relations with both the Afghan government and the government of Pakistan, which has close relations with the Afghan Taliban. China believes it is in a favorable position of being able to talk with all major players in the Afghan peace negotiations.²⁰

The early communication between China and the Taliban can be traced back to the 1990s.²¹ but China began to contact the Taliban officially in November 2014, when a Taliban delegation led by Qari Din Muhammad, who is the head of the Taliban office in Doha, came to China to “share the Islamic Emirate’s stance with China.”²² This visit coincided with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani’s official visit to China. To facilitate the bilateral meeting between the Afghan government and the Taliban, China also maintains cooperative relations with the United States, the most vital state in solving the Afghanistan issue. China hopes to create an international and regional mechanism for Afghan peace talks led by China. According to Ambassador Sun Yuxi, the mechanism designed by China has two elements: “one tripod involves talks between China, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the second is a group of regional countries called ‘six plus one,’ which involves US, Russia, China, India, Pakistan and Iran and the one being Afghanistan.”²³

China’s Challenges in Afghanistan

Since 2012 Afghanistan has occupied an increasingly prominent place in China’s foreign policy, because of the growth of terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan after the US military withdrawal, and because of the One Belt One Road initiative, which sets relationships with Western neighbors

as a priority on the Chinese foreign policy agenda. Nonetheless, China still grapples with both economic and political challenges in Afghanistan.

Economically, the One Belt One Road initiative faces regional competition, and it is not the first strategic framework put forward by great powers to connect Afghanistan with the outside world. The United States published two acts (the Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999 and the Silk Road Strategy Act of 2005) to assist the Central and South Asian states, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to “build prosperous market-oriented economies in the former Soviet Union” and “support the economic and political independence of the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus in recognition of political and economic changes in these regions.”²⁴ In 2004 Japan also put forward the Silk Road Diplomacy strategy, originating from the Eurasia diplomacy, which aimed to strengthen Japanese commercial and business ties with Central Asian and Trans-Caucasia states. According to Japan, the Silk Road Diplomacy is to encourage political stability, political democratization, and nuclear nonproliferation in Central Asia and Trans-Caucasia states. Japan and Central Asian states established the Central Asia + Japan dialogue mechanism in 2004 to strengthen the political trust among Japan and Central Asian states. Chinese scholars believe the Silk Road Diplomacy and Silk Road Strategy Act were “exclusive,” and aimed to “decrease Chinese political and economic influence in Central Asia.”²⁵

On the other hand, China’s investment in Afghanistan is challenged by negative social surrounding and security threats. Similar to its investments in other developing states, Chinese investment is usually focused on resources, and this leads to criticism and risks. For example, Chinese companies in Afghanistan were subject to criticism regarding the Aynak project, which is not far away from Kabul, home to some of the oldest Buddhist artifacts in Central Asia. The Aynak project, backed and operated by the Chinese MCC and JCC companies, had to destroy Buddhist relics in the extraction area to start the project construction, generating negative reactions in Western media. The criticism forced the Chinese investors to delay the starting date of the project several times.

Chinese products, on the one hand, strengthen the economic relationship between China and Afghanistan, while on the other hand, damage China’s image among the Afghan population. Many Afghans believe the Chinese products, which are cheaper and higher quality, take local jobs away.²⁶ For its part, the Afghan local government has accused Chinese companies of

reneging on the promise to build a railroad, rather than simply conduct a feasibility study.²⁷ This, coupled with delays for Chinese projects in Afghanistan, have generated uncertainty about Chinese companies' economic profits in Afghanistan.

Chinese companies also face security threats in Afghanistan. Based on the principle of "non-interference in other states' affairs," China refrains from sending military forces into Afghanistan to protect its overseas interests and individuals. Various militant groups have attacked Aynak many times during the past years. The Amu Darya basin must cope with possible security attacks and threats. Given the weak presence of the Afghan central government in Amu Darya basin, CNPC even has to pay protection fees to local tribes and militia groups to receive security protection for both Chinese individuals and infrastructure, allowing the company to operate in a relatively safe environment.

From the security dimension, China's role in Afghanistan is still weak and the self-defined constructive role is far from enough to bridge the gap between the Afghan government and the Taliban. From the diplomatic dimension, the constructive role means it is difficult for China to direct the peace process in Afghanistan. China relies heavily on Pakistan to facilitate the meeting between the Afghan government and Taliban. Pakistan's nickname in China is "all-weather friend." Given this closeness, China believes it is able to exert more influence on Pakistan than other states. However, ironically, it is Pakistan's intricate relationship with the Taliban that contributes to Afghanistan's current instability. Pakistan's particular interests in Afghanistan, especially its geopolitical rivalry with India and its special relation with the Taliban may make China's diplomatic efforts in vain. By doing half the work, it is difficult for China to double the result.

On an academic level, China lacks knowledge about Afghanistan. Although the number of academic papers on Afghanistan increased suddenly after 2001, largely in the aftermath of September 11, the majority of the Chinese academic papers analyze the Afghanistan under the framework of international relations theories or the perspective of great power competition, while very few papers focus on the Afghan domestic situation, political affairs, or history (table 2). "Generally, Chinese scholars only start to research Afghanistan when the state either conventionally or unconventionally, threatens China."²⁸

Table 2. Afghanistan in Chinese: Academic Papers (2001-14)

	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14
"Afghanistan" included in the title	103	225	49	41	32	46	48	66	112	134	103	112	125	113
"Afghanistan" included in the keywords	6	17	4	2	4	6	5	16	27	32	32	40	44	52
Concentrating on Afghan domestic affairs	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	3	1	0	1	6	9

Source: collected by author from: www.cnki.net

Conclusion

China has an interest in Afghanistan's long term stability. With the One Belt One Road initiative, China began to invest more foreign reserves into Afghanistan to strengthen the bilateral economic ties between the two states; meanwhile, with the US withdrawal of its military forces from Afghanistan, there is a real possibility that the security situation in Afghanistan will deteriorate. China worries that the instability of Afghanistan may destabilize Xinjiang, and China needs to protect its economic interests and individuals in Afghanistan. The government led by Xi Jinping has managed to help secure its long term interests in Afghanistan through political, economic, and diplomatic efforts.

The argument that China may fill the power vacuum after the US withdrawal is seriously lacking. Although China's strategic and political influence in Afghanistan increased significantly after 2012, it is still limited. China hopes to work together with various international organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and with global and regional powers such as the United States, Pakistan, India, Iran, and Russia, to stimulate the Afghanistan peace process and encourage stability. However, the question remains whether with the One Belt One Road initiative and the security vacuum after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Beijing's limited engagements and constructive role in Afghanistan protect China's economic interests and prevent the spillover of terrorism and extremism from Afghanistan.

Notes

- 1 Baghramyan Buddha was destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001.
- 2 Given the poor security situation, the Chinese investment in the Aynak project was suspended in August 2013.
- 3 Erica S. Downs, "China Buys into Afghanistan," *SAIS Review* 32, no. 2 (2012): 65.
- 4 Spogmai interviews with China's ambassador Xu Feihong, Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, March 22, 2013, <http://af.china-embassy.org/chn/sgxw/t1023888.htm>.
- 5 Chen Qian, "The Reconstruction of Afghanistan and China's One Belt One Road," *China Youth*, November 29, 2014, p. 4.
- 6 See "Speech by Premier Li Keqiang at Fourth Ministerial Conference of Istanbul Process on Afghanistan," *Xinhua News*, October 31, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-10/31/c_133757532.htm.
- 7 "China will Afford Zero Tariff Status to 95 percent of Afghan Imports," *Ministry of Commerce of People's Republic of China*, October 15, 2012, <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/i/jyjl/j/201210/20121008382592.html>.
- 8 "Brief Introduction to China-Afghanistan Economic Cooperation," *Ministry of Commerce of People's Republic of China*, February 2, 2016, <http://yzs.mofcom.gov.cn/article/t/201602/20160201250094.shtml>.
- 9 See Andrew Small, "China, the United States, and the Question of Afghanistan," Testimony before the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 18, 2015, http://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Small%20Testimony_3.18.15.pdf.
- 10 For example, Prof. Ma Lirong terms the relationship between the Taliban and ETIM as "coexistence" (*gong sheng*). See Ma Lirong, "The Middle East Factors in Xinjiang-related Terrorism Incidents and International Cooperation against Terrorism," *Arab World Studies* 1 (January 2015): 24-25.
- 11 For example, terrorist attacks planned by Uyghur Islamic extremists targeted Tiananmen Square in Beijing in October of 2013, causing more than 40 casualties, and targeted the railway station of Kunming, southwest of China, in March 2014, causing more than 130 casualties.
- 12 See Wu Sike, "The Strategic Docking between China and Middle East Countries under the 'Belt and Road' Framework," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 9, no. 4 (2015): 1-13. Wu Sike was China's Special Envoy on Middle East Affairs from 2009 to 2014.
- 13 "Xi Jinping: China should Shoulder more International Responsibility and Undertake more Obligations," *China News*, March 19, 2013, http://news.china.com.cn/txt/2013-03/19/content_28293716.htm.
- 14 See Wang Jin, "What to Make of China's Latest Meeting with the Taliban," *The Diplomat*, August 5, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/what-to-make-of-chinas-latest-meeting-with-the-taliban>.
- 15 He Jie, "On China's Assistance to Afghanistan," *International Information* No.3, 2016, p. 2.

- 16 See Sun Yiran, "AIIB, One Belt One Road, and China's Perception of International Order," *Chinese Journal of Foreign Policy Review* 1 (2006): 24-46; Wang Da and Xiang Weixing, "The Global Financial Governance of AIIB: Its Challenges to China," *Chinese Journal of International Review* 5 (2015): 71-81.
- 17 "Premier Li Keqiang Meets SCO Counterparts," *CCTV News*, December 16, 2015, <http://english.cntv.cn/2015/12/16/VIDE1450216080647756.shtml>.
- 18 "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference on January 6, 2015," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 6, 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1225965.shtml.
- 19 See Wang Jin, "What to Make of China's Latest Meeting with the Taliban."
- 20 Zhao Huasheng, "Afghanistan and China's New Neighbourhood Diplomacy," *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): 894.
- 21 Early in the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, China hoped to develop a relationship with the Taliban government and tried to get the promise from the Taliban of not assisting or supporting ETIM or other Islamic extremist groups that aimed to target China. In return, China promised to recognize the legitimacy of the Taliban government and back it in various international organizations such as the UN. China's ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, became the first senior representative of a non-Muslim state to meet with Mullah Omar, although the meeting yielded little fruit. This led China to distance itself from the Taliban regime and cut ties with Afghanistan.
- 22 "Afghan Taliban Delegation Visited China Recently," *News International*, January 2, 2015, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/10080-afghan-taliban-delegation-visited-china-recently#>.
- 23 Ahmed Rashid, "Can China Bring Peace to Afghanistan?" *BBC*, December 1, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30273431>.
- 24 Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999, Capitol Words, August 5, 1999, http://capitolwords.org/date/1999/08/05/E1794-2_silk-road-strategy-act-of-1999.
- 25 "Afghanistan and One Belt One Road: Regional Competition and Challenges," *Chinese Journal of West Asia and Africa* 2 (2016): 22.
- 26 Zhu Yongbiao, "China's Policy to Afghanistan after US Withdrawal," *South Asia Studies* 1 (2016): 86.
- 27 Alexander Petersen, "China's Strategy in Afghanistan," *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/05/chinas-strategy-in-afghanistan/276052/>.
- 28 Zhu Yongbiao, "China's Policy to Afghanistan after US Withdrawal," p. 79.