

Understanding the Cultural Fabric: The Missing Piece in China's outreach to bring peace to Afghanistan

Kane Luo, Vice President of Wakhan Abresham Consulting Service and Raffaello Pantucci, Director, International Security Studies, the Royal United Services Institute

A head of state's first visit abroad is usually a strong indicator of that country's future foreign policy. So when Ashraf Ghani, the newly elected President of Afghanistan chose China as the destination of his first state visit, the message from the new President of Afghanistan was clear: as we enter the year of NATO withdrawal, Afghanistan is increasingly looking East.

President Ghani certainly received a warm welcome in Beijing; President Xi Jinping showed China's generosity promising a \$330 million aid package over the next 3 years, a figure that exceeds China's combined aid to Afghanistan for the last 14 years. China also announced a plan to help to train 3,000 Afghans in various fields, something that builds on previous promises of training, including an earlier program announced during former Politburo member Zhou Yongkang's visit to Kabul in 2012 of 300 Afghan police. The discussion of re-opening the Wakhan Corridor, the slim mountainous borderland between Afghanistan and China that has long been a request of the Afghan government, has been restarted. Visa requirements for government officials of both countries are said to possibly be about to be scrapped. But in many ways, the most interesting outcome of Ghani's visit to China was the revelation that China would offer itself as a host for peace discussions between the Taliban and the government in Kabul – bringing all relevant sides to the table to help broker peace in the country. Whether this approach will bear fruit is unclear, but its seeming admission and confirmation by officials highlights the fact that China is proving itself increasingly willing to accept it has an important role to play in Afghanistan's future.

China's motives behind her rapidly increasing efforts in Afghanistan are multiple, but the factor most often cited by Chinese experts and officials is domestic security. Violent, disenfranchised individuals from Xinjiang are becoming an increasingly deadly threat, something that has been increasing since 2008 and reached something of a crescendo in the past year. It is unclear how much manpower, resources and organizational capability Uyghur militants actually have; but their increased use of explosives, suicidal tactics and rising frequency of attacks are proof of a problem that is increasing. Angry denizens from Xinjiang

have also shown a growing desire to launch attacks in not only remote areas of Xinjiang, but also in major political and population centers in eastern China as well, as the attack in October 2013 in Tiananmen Square, the March 2014 attack in Kunming and other incidents have demonstrated.

The link to these groups and Afghanistan come through Beijing's claims that they possess evidence to prove that Uyghur militant groups are trained, financed and organized by 'East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)', which is further linked with Afghan Taliban, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Al-Qaeda Central (AQC) in Afghan-Pakistani border area. There is some historical precedent to this link dating back to before September 11, 2001. A number sources verify the presence of Uyghurs in substantial numbers in Taliban Afghanistan with some pledging allegiance to Mullah Omar. These days it may not be the case that every terrorist attack in China is launched from caves of Waziristan (something increasingly recognized by Chinese experts); but Uyghur militants' recent tactics indicate that they are certainly getting ideas from the global Jihadist movement, be it in Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria. Beijing's concern is that if these Islamic militants are left unchecked and Afghanistan is allowed to become a source of regional instability once again, a sophisticated enough terrorist attack may finally emerge or instigate some larger incident in Xinjiang that would expand the current instability in Xinjiang further around the nation.

Another important reason behind China's evolving Afghan policy is Beijing's concern over her 'One Belt, One Road' initiative. The so called 'One Belt, One Road' initiative consists principally of the 'New Silk Road Economic Belt' and the 'Maritime Silk Road' (with side projects stretching from Kashgar to Gwadar in the form of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-Myanmar-India (BCIM) corridor), an extremely ambitious grand strategic design of President Xi Jinping's administration. The 'One Belt, One Road' initiative is meant to drastically increase the movement of capital, humans, goods, speed up cultural exchanges and even start to harmonize governmental policies across Eurasia; by constructing two separate but complementary routes that both start from China and then stretch westward. The 'New Silk Road Economic Belt' goes through Central Asia, Russia, Iran, and Arabia before finally reaching Europe; the 'Maritime Silk Road' passes through Malacca Strait, Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf and ultimately reaches the Mediterranean Sea. The 'One Belt, One Road' initiative includes thousands of miles of proposed high-speed railway and highway, seaports and airports, oil and gas pipelines, even nuclear power stations that will cost trillions of U.S. dollars and decades to build. It would conclude with the

development of massive trade and economic corridors bringing Chinese products to the world, and opening China even further. It would also have the ancillary effect of redeveloping a large swathe of China's immediate periphery, something that has led to some prominent Chinese commentators, like Dingding Cheng, to describe it as 'China's Marshall Plan,' a reference to the post-Second World War America's massive effort to rebuild Europe. Afghanistan plays a very dangerous potential spoiler role within this, sitting adjacent to China and in the midst of a number of these land corridors emanating from China's western provinces. Should the country collapse into chaos and become an exporter or incubator of instability, it would likely upset this key part of this plan.

But beyond just seeing the importance of Afghanistan to China's domestic health, Beijing policymakers also see the importance of regional relationships to ensure a stable future. However, in contrast to the United States, China has the advantage of having far less contentious relationships with a key partner for Afghanistan, Pakistan. China is well aware of its influence over Islamabad, and has long nurtured a strong bilateral relationship with the country that both cherish publicly and loudly. China has already used its influence to bring Pakistan and Afghanistan to the table, as well as initiate a number of other regional discussions involving Pakistan (or about Pakistan), the recent admission of contact with the Taliban and a willingness to use this relationship to advance reconciliation all highlight the degree to which China is showing it is willing to use its relationships in advance of greater regional stability.

This approach to bringing the Taliban to the table is not, however, without its difficulties. Taliban are likely to play some role in Afghanistan's future; but the trouble is, the Afghan government and Taliban today are both highly fragmented entities that lack centralised authority for Beijing to effectively engage with. The Taliban's addition into this mix will only further complicate Afghanistan's already difficult political situation. Finally, for China to be taking such a forward role in such a sensitive aspect of Afghan affairs will make it harder for China to maintain its position of detachment from events in Afghanistan – something that has in the past given the country a certain neutral image within Afghanistan.

There are further problems with taking the role of reconciler with a group that is reviled by many Afghans (the Taliban) and country (Pakistan) that many Afghans blame for some of their security problems. Anti-Pakistani feeling is very high amongst Afghans who see their neighbours as meddlers who have supported groups that have led to many deaths. Being seen

as a close ally to both the Taliban and Pakistan might not play well amongst the Afghan public. Others within Afghanistan continue to feel that the Taliban have no role to play in their country's future, highlighting with anger the fact that the government in Kabul is being forced to reconcile with a group that has shown no remorse in butchering civilians, officials, and soldiers alike. Finally, it is not entirely clear the degree to which outside stakeholders will all welcome this mediating role – for western powers, any support in bringing stability and peace to Afghanistan is welcome, but for players like India, Iran or the Central Asian powers, they have their own regional dynamics to consider. These are all issues that Beijing needs to consider. Beijing must have a 360 degree of vision and be mindful of a basic reality in international affairs: when a button is pressed, there will be a series of chain-reactions. Some of these reactions can be predicted, but others will require rapid appropriate policy responses, something Beijing has historically had some issues with undertaking.

This diplomatic approach aside, China has also placed significant emphasis on developing Afghanistan's economy, something highlighted again during President Ghani's visit to Beijing. However, bringing economic and social progress to Afghanistan often requires an acceptable level of security as a pre-condition, something highlighted by the particular problems experienced by the two biggest Chinese investors in the country: the China Metallurgical Company (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper's investment at Mes Aynak and China National Petroleum Corp's (CNPC) project in the Amu Darya basin near the border with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Both projects have faced numerous difficulties hindering progress, with security ranking fairly high amongst concerns. Talking to officials at both companies, they will report security as a major factor, though it is likely that it is only one of a number of problems encountered. Others include difficulties with local authorities, lack of access to raw materials and infrastructure.

For the Afghan Taliban there is a natural desire to want to try to prevent any national economic progress from taking place, as a strategy to prevent the government in Kabul gathering public support. In another words, people will not always welcome progress with open arms, and in Afghanistan there is some question of whether major projects can proceed without the support of superior firepower. Despite China's recently increased efforts in Afghanistan's economic sphere, if Beijing really wants to see positive results, Beijing still needs to greatly expand the security-related cooperation it is looking to undertake in Afghanistan, as well as seek out bolstering cooperative relationships with powers like India and the remaining western forces.

Finally, and in some ways most importantly, as world's biggest economy in terms of purchasing power, China has the material resources to achieve her objectives in Afghanistan. However, the lack of human expertise on Afghanistan in particular is a substantial invisible problem that China urgently needs to overcome. Because material resources cannot correctly allocate themselves, they need people to manage them and these people need a deep understanding of their surrounding environment. In other words, China has a need to grow a pool of people who understand Afghanistan's complex social realities, ethnic mosaics, cultural customs and fragmented history. There is a need for China to support its push into Afghanistan with people who speak fluent Farsi and Pashtun, people who understand the Islamic world, or even, are Muslims themselves. Currently, such knowledge and skills are only the privilege of a few of China's intelligence officers, diplomats and scholars; but they should also be extended to executive managers and chief engineers in China's state-owned corporations and the general Chinese population too. This sort of deep cultural knowledge and understanding is the only way to make sure the multi-billion dollar investments are being effectively implemented, as these individuals will be able to better understand and interact with the fabric of Afghan society. This will help avoid unnecessary tensions and misunderstandings, and is as essential as the multi-billion dollar aid packages as it guarantees they will actually have impact.

Unlike Britain, the United States or other western or regional powers who have been actively engaging Afghanistan for decades, either through peaceful means or through wars; China has had little intensive engagement with Afghanistan throughout its history. China has never fought a war with Afghanistan (though it played a supporting role in the anti-Soviet jihad); many of the few Chinese intellectuals who understood Afghan Central Asia were purged during early, and at the time the role of ambassadors to the Muslim world were not seen in a positive light. Although China opened up in 1970s, letting the world gradually in again and exposing itself to the world, China was almost exclusively focused on the West and China's Eastern Asian neighbours, a preference that has continued to this day. It is only very recently that China found itself needing to engage to a greater extent with Central Asia and Afghanistan in particular. China needs more of everything that stimulates China's knowledge of Afghanistan, otherwise the push towards Afghanistan will find it lacks the crucial internal building blocs to ensure it has a solid foundation for the future.