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Summary: As the United States and Europe look for additional sources of leverage in Pakistan and Afghanistan, a heightened role for China is one of the most promising—and the least discussed. China's substantial strategic interests in Pakistan, its major investments in both countries, and security concerns that range from narcotics flows to terrorist bases give it many shared stakes with the West.

But translating common interests into complementary policies will be a challenge. While Beijing is willing to expand cooperation with the Obama administration on Af-Pak, it is concerned to protect its close relationship with Islamabad and has broader anxieties about NATO's role in the region. If China is going to be brought on board as an effective partner, the United States and Europe must develop a carefully focused engagement strategy that takes full account of both the difficulties and the opportunities that greater Chinese involvement presents.

China's Af-Pak Moment

by Andrew Small¹

The latest stop on the Af-Pak regional engagement circuit is Beijing. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, recently paid his first visit since the announcement of the new U.S. strategy, with French counterpart Pierre Lellouche hot on his heels. The prize is as elusive as it is glittering. China's unique level of trust with Pakistan and its economic clout make it one of the few external powers capable of having a meaningful impact on the deteriorating situation in both countries. Yet its role in addressing the crisis has so far been modest, and coordination with the United States and its NATO allies relatively limited.

The hope is that fresh efforts to engage Beijing can remedy this. With China's own interests so vitally at stake—particularly in Pakistan—analysts close to the Chinese government have been suggesting that Afghanistan-Pakistan could become the most important area of strategic cooperation between China and the West. But getting Beijing on board as an effective partner is not going to be a straightforward process. Beyond its usual foreign policy conservatism, Chinese hesitancy results from real obstacles that any engagement process must seek to overcome. The good news is that none of them are insurmountable. And if the engagement strategy is handled well, Beijing could yet prove to be one of the most important pieces of the regional puzzle.

“Deeper than the deepest ocean”: The Sino-Pak axis

The prospects are tantalizing. The sheer scale of the resources that China can deploy is already on show in Afghanistan, where its \$3.5 billion investment in the Aynak copper mine will be the largest in the country's history. But it is Beijing's relationship with Islamabad that has the most intriguing potential. China has been Pakistan's most reliable ally over the last 50 years, with a critical role supporting Islamabad's conventional and nuclear weapons programs. The result is a unique level of trust and leverage with key political, military, and intelligence actors in the country, including many of those who trust the United States least. It is influence that China rarely seeks to use. But when it does, Islamabad listens. In the aftermath of 9/11, U.S. threats may have been the main factor behind Pakistan's cooperation in Operation Enduring Freedom, but they were supported by forceful messages from Chinese envoys that Pakistan's future was at stake if it refused. And when the Pakistani security forces moved against the militants occupying Lal Masjid in July 2007, they did so under heavy Chinese pressure, as senior leaders in Beijing demanded action against the threat to Chinese personnel emanating from the heart of Pakistan's capital.

The idea that this relationship might be harnessed to achieve shared strategic goals with the West is not a new one. From the

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CIA-funded Chinese weapons that flowed to support the Mujahideen against the former Soviet Union through to the quietly coordinated efforts to hold off the prospects of nuclear war in South Asia after the Kargil conflict in 1999, and the 2001 attacks on the Indian parliament, Sino-U.S. cooperation on Afghanistan and Pakistan has a history. The Bush administration was no exception. As well as counter-terrorism, Assistant Secretary-level dialogues on South Asia were established after 2005, and ad-hoc consultations took place on issues ranging from the stability of the Musharraf government to last year's economic crisis in Pakistan. But while 2009 may not be year zero, the new engagement initiatives hold out more promise than past efforts. The Obama administration's upgrading of Afghanistan-Pakistan to the level of a major security priority, the new strategy, and the regional approach all provide a substantially different context. This has been evident in Beijing for several months. Chinese experts on the Sino-U.S. relationship have been getting their heads around the issue in preparation for Af-Pak becoming a principal focal point of Sino-American dialogue. In early discussions during U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit, the Defense Policy Coordination Talks, and Ambassador Holbrooke's trip, Beijing signaled a willingness to cooperate in principle. But while the new context is important, it is the hard facts of the situation in Pakistan that may provide even greater momentum.

For China, diminishing Pakistani state capacity and the encroachment of the insurgency across Northern Pakistan pose substantial risks. Until recently, Beijing could largely rely on Pakistan's government. Whether through crackdowns on Baluchi insurgents targeting Chinese workers, or ISI pressure on its jihadi clients to cut off support to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Chinese interests were a protected class. Military rule or civilian rule, whichever political party held power—none of it made a great difference. As one Chinese military officer responsible for Sino-Pakistani relations over many years noted: "They disagree on almost everything there—the one thing they agree on is that they all want good relations with China." That protected status has gone. As Pakistan's government has become a target, so has China. Chinese workers have been variously kidnapped and executed in Dir, Peshawar, and Islamabad as jihadi groups seek to weaken the central state and the bases of its external support. Chinese officials watched with growing irritation—and anxiety—at the length of time that it took for Pakistani authorities to secure the release of the Chinese engineer kidnapped in Swat. Official discussions were held in Beijing last year about pulling Chinese workers out of the country altogether. China also sent senior security officials to warn Pakistan that ETIM has its base in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and is planning attacks in China this year—but is no longer sure that the

Pakistani military is able to act on the threat.

Plans to develop Pakistan into China's energy corridor from the Gulf, with routes running from the Karakorum highway to the deep-water port at Gwadar, are also in doubt. The Taliban's penetration of Swat and beyond brought them perilously close to the principal land-routes to China. And like their counterparts in Washington, Chinese security analysts are evaluating how to respond to the worst-case scenarios: militants either getting their hands on the nuclear weapons that China itself helped to develop, or successfully provoking a war with India. The Mumbai attacks prompted Beijing's most active efforts at South Asian shuttle diplomacy to date. They also finally pushed China to support the imposition of sanctions on Jamaat-ud-Dawa, the Lashkar-e-Taiba front, which it had previously protected in the UN Security Council's Sanctions Committee at Islamabad's behest. China has its security concerns in Afghanistan too. It has discussed the security of the Aynak investment with everyone down to the Czech Provincial Reconstruction Team, and worsening drugs flows into Xinjiang have prompted increases in border security. But it is the crisis in Pakistan that attracts a far higher order of concern in Beijing.

"Bu chu tou": Chinese leadership anxieties

Despite the stakes, China continues to be apprehensive about cooperating with the West in addressing these challenges. Any risk of jeopardizing—or opening up to scrutiny—what has been arguably China's closest alliance over the past 50 years is viewed with trepidation. As one former Chinese diplomat put it: "The relationship goes as deep as you can imagine. Pakistan's friends in China are not just the people who've passed through the South Asia desk but those who've seen Pakistan's support on Taiwan, Tibet, in international organizations, arms control, and disarmament. Not to mention the military. There are a lot of people who still need to be persuaded." At a minimum, this leads to an aversion to multilateralizing the relationship. China's ambivalent participation in the Friends of Democratic Pakistan grouping, which saw it turn down the opportunity to host the last gathering, is a pointed example.

There are also gaps in attitude about how to address the crisis in Pakistan. Almost across the board in China, there is a consistent hankering for the Musharraf presidency, and a dismissiveness of the current civilian leadership. This is partly about Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari himself, with whom relations are at best cool, but it also reflects a widely held Chinese view that military rule, or at least military predominance, is the only effective way of running Pakistan. China is not alone in this perspective, but for those who

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believe that support for Pakistan's democracy and rule of law is part of the solution, it is hard to envisage China wholeheartedly on side.

China also remains suspicious about the whole Af-Pak venture, whether the role of NATO or the longer-term U.S. agenda in the region. It has long feared this to be part of an encirclement strategy that will see U.S. bases remain near China's borders for decades to come. Some Chinese analysts describe a Chinese military torn between the benefits of stabilizing its periphery and the threat of containment—it may not want the West to fail in Afghanistan but it is far from sure that it wants too convincing a success either. Relations with NATO itself remain testy and the Belgrade embassy bombing casts a long shadow. China is particularly cautious about providing any direct support to the military efforts—aversion to getting involved in the “Afghan quagmire” is pervasive. There is also an abiding belief that China should stay away from the front line if it wants to avoid inflaming further unrest among its own Muslim population or becoming a more serious target of international terrorism. Chinese analysts acknowledge that they fall into the category of “enemy number two” for transnational terrorists but that for now, the West—and particularly the United States—is “enemy number one.” Indeed, there is still a hope that groups with a specifically anti-Chinese agenda, such as ETIM, can be decoupled from their collaborators and supporters. With the Pakistani state weakening, China is looking for ways to reach out more directly to Islamist groups, as seen most strikingly in the recent Memorandum of Understanding signed between the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami. Despite its strong preference for the military and the secular political parties, Beijing is already starting to hedge its bets.

“A responsible and constructive role”: Will China step up?

Bringing China on board in dealing with the Af-Pak crisis will therefore be a challenge. China's security interests may be closely aligned with the West but that does not imply that Beijing will see active partnership as the best way to deliver them. There are, nevertheless, some reasons to think it might. Pakistan's ability to play its external sponsors off against each other is a source of frustration to Beijing as much as to anyone else. Coordination is the only way around that. China wants the scope to shape and influence the collective international response to the Af-Pak situation, as well as simply to understand Western policy better, from current strategy to contingency planning. This will require a more active level of cooperation than currently exists. China also concerned to manage both its international reputation and its relationship with the United States. On major U.S. security priorities, Beijing is keen to find areas where it can be seen to be playing a responsible and cooperative

role—especially where it can do so without jeopardizing its other strategic goals and bilateral relationships in the process. Af-Pak offers better prospects in many respects than other foreign policy hard cases such as North Korea, Iran, Sudan, or Burma. There, while genuinely shared interests in nonproliferation and long-term stability exist, they are constantly traded off against China's other commercial, energy security, border security, and ideological objectives. Not least, China sees Western requests as requiring it to act against the perceived interests of the governments in question.

By contrast, in the case of Pakistan, China can play a role that aligns its different objectives. It can support the stabilization of the country and China's strategic and commercial interests with it. It can help to secure Beijing's principal constituencies in Pakistan's government and military, rather than the far more unfriendly alternatives. And in the process, it can gain substantial political credit with the United States and many other countries besides.

At the moment many Chinese security analysts themselves acknowledge that China is not doing enough. If anything, recent efforts to deal with the specific risks to Chinese citizens rather than the broader systemic threat that the jihadi groups represent have exacerbated the problems. The release of the kidnapped Chinese engineer was part of the deal that sold Swat out to the Pakistani Taliban, and the Lal Masjid operation only served to make China a greater target. Beijing now faces an important choice. Its influence, credibility, and even popular standing are now strong. There is a real risk that a failure to use that influence in Pakistan may lead to adverse strategic shifts that cannot be reversed.

“Feeling the stones”: Building a partnership on Af-Pak

This will be China's call to make, but there is plenty that the United States and its allies can do to influence that decision. And the likelihood of success is greater if a few key steps are followed.

First, push Af-Pak up the agenda. As ever, securing Chinese cooperation on major foreign policy issues requires embedding them in the minds of China's top leaders, and that will require Af-Pak taking a far more prominent place in the U.S.-China dialogue than it has to date. It took a nuclear test before China became genuinely active on the North Korean crisis and without consistent messages of international concern from the highest levels, it remains entirely possible that China will stand to the side even as the situation continues to deteriorate. Pushing it up the agenda will require coordinated messages and the use of multiple channels. There are several new efforts in the offing to engage Beijing on Afghanistan and Pakistan, and given the complexity of the situation, there is the risk that the

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messages will be diffuse and ineffective. The United States and its European allies in particular should ensure that their approaches are focused on a few shared, core points. These messages also need to be conveyed to multiple interlocutors on the Chinese side if a critical mass of support is going to be built—at the top leadership levels; in dialogues with the foreign ministry, the military, the Party, and intelligence contacts; and even at a track-two level, where, with very few exceptions, dialogues with influential Chinese think tanks on Afghanistan and Pakistan are very underdeveloped.

Second, spend political capital on Pakistan, not Afghanistan. China has greater capacity to make a difference to the situation there and a much stronger sense of ownership of the problem. As one Chinese analyst put it: “Afghanistan is not China’s business; Pakistan is a joint responsibility.” Especially in the short-to-medium term, China’s direct contributions to Afghanistan are likely to be marginal. China will not be sending troops any time soon. Logistical routes through Xinjiang are of relatively little practical value. China can increase existing efforts, such as its aid and its counter-narcotics training, but these are still likely to be dwarfed by other international contributions. While it is worth talking to China about the total picture, it should be Pakistan that makes it to the Secretary of State and President’s talking points on a regular basis. European leaders should echo this approach.

Third, push Pakistan largely to the bilateral track; and Afghanistan to the multilateral one. China does not want to compromise its “special relationship” with Pakistan and is more effective as a partner to the West if its relationship of trust remains intact. Any sense that China’s actions are motivated more by concern for its relations with the United States than Pakistan’s security interests would be counterproductive. The goal of engagement with China should be to achieve a shared diagnosis of the problem, which China can then address through the spectrum of its own bilateral economic, military, and political relations: actions that are parallel but coordinated. As one Chinese analyst stated: “The U.S. can be on stage, China should do the behind the doors work.” China will still want to be present at multilateral forums on Pakistan, but expectations for its role in any such structures would be best kept low. Pakistan is not North Korea—it is a reliable, if troubled, ally rather than an embarrassing irritant.

The approach to Afghanistan is the opposite. While it will continue to feature usefully in bilateral dialogues, China’s involvement in Afghanistan will be greater the more multilateral cover it has. If that cannot be through the UN, as Beijing would prefer, China’s suggestions of a greater role for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) need to be taken seriously and the process of engaging the SCO

on Afghanistan, which began at the Moscow conference in March, should be expanded. Given its limits as an institution, this may amount more to symbolism than to substance, but the symbolism matters nonetheless. NATO also needs to expand its direct contacts with China. Existing dialogue is too modest and unsystematic to make a difference to Chinese suspicions, especially among the Chinese military. A more regular, high-level process of exchanges should be established and must seek to include Chinese military officers rather than just the existing official contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Fourth, the circle needs to be squared between Beijing’s anxieties about the chaos that would ensue from an early Western exit and its countervailing concerns about long-term U.S. strategy. China is still looking for reassurances about the U.S. role in the region, most notably about military bases, and will provide far more support in the short-to-medium term if it is confident about these strategic questions. With this in mind, Beijing will also closely watch U.S. and NATO relationships with other key non-Western powers in addressing different elements of the Af-Pak situation—particularly Russia, Iran, and India—and take their attitudes into account when considering the scope of the Chinese role. But reassurance about U.S. intentions should not amount to signaling quick exit strategies. Like many other actors in the region, if China is convinced that the United States has a credible commitment to the long-term future of Afghanistan and Pakistan, it will be less likely to hedge on a Taliban resurgence. It will also be more comfortable about committing economic resources to both countries if it feels that doing so is part of a viable path to stability and development. China needs to believe that this is the best path to a diminished Western role in the region.

Fifth, play to China’s strengths and expand its comfort zone. Behind-the-scenes work in cajoling Pakistan’s government and military to address the insurgency and the jihadi groups in Pakistan’s major cities is China’s most urgently needed contribution. If China, the United States, and preferably Saudi Arabia too, are in sync on this issue, it would have considerable impact. China is uniquely placed to press for changes to Pakistani defense structures without serious suspicion of its intent—and to provide reassurances and support alongside that pressure. Over the medium term, greater Chinese economic and development involvement will also be important. Reconstruction Opportunity Zones, of the sort proposed in recent U.S. legislation, will only be successful if the right infrastructure and transport routes are established, and China is especially well placed to support that. Its investments in infrastructure in Pakistan are already substantial, and are being replicated in Afghanistan in order to make the Aynak investment viable. China can also play its part in improv-

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ing relations between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan. China has resisted Pakistani suggestions to set up an entirely parallel mechanism to the U.S. dialogue, but a mediation role could still act to complement American efforts and helps to deepen Chinese involvement.

By contrast, discussion about Chinese military involvement, and other ambitious goals such as cooperation on securing nuclear materials or coordination on state collapse scenarios—which some in Beijing have mooted—should be addressed through track-two channels or held off until higher levels of mutual confidence have been built. Achieving that is likely to require active efforts to demonstrate that substantive cooperation will yield quick and clear benefits for China. Discussion cannot take place simply on the basis of Western “asks.”

China’s “peaceful and prosperous neighborhood”

It is clear that greater Chinese involvement would not come without costs. Some of the potential courses of action to secure Chinese support have broader strategic implications that need to be weighed in the balance, whether for NATO’s relationships in the region, U.S. strategy in Central Asia, or Western policy towards the SCO. India would view elements of this agenda nervously. But the core goals to which China matters most and which matter most to China—stabilizing and securing Pakistan—are shared by all sides, including most Pakistanis. Translating common interests into complementary policies will inevitably be difficult, and may be a slow process. But it is in everyone’s interests to get it right—and perhaps even more so for China than for the West.

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