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China could prove ultimate winner in Afghanistan

By DENIS D. GRAY

Jan. 26, 2013

China, long a bystander to the conflict in Afghanistan, is stepping up its involvement as U.S.-led forces prepare to withdraw, attracted by the country's vast mineral resources but concerned that any post-2014 chaos could embolden Islamist insurgents in its own territory.

Cheered on by the U.S. and other Western governments, which see Asia's giant as a potentially stabilizing force, China could prove the ultimate winner in Afghanistan - having shed no blood and not much aid.

Security - or the lack of it - remains the key challenge: Chinese enterprises have already bagged three multibillion dollar investment projects, but they won't be able to go forward unless conditions get safer. While the Chinese do not appear ready to rush into any vacuum left by the withdrawal of foreign troops, a definite shift toward a more hands-on approach to Afghanistan is under way.

EDITOR'S NOTE - This story is part of "China's Reach," a project tracking China's influence on its trading partners over the past three decades and exploring how that is changing business, politics and daily life. Keep up with AP's reporting on China's Reach, and join the conversation about it, using the hashtag (hash)APChinaReach on Twitter.

Beijing signed a strategic partnership last summer with the war-torn country. This was followed in September with a trip to Kabul by its top security official, the first by a leading Chinese government figure in 46 years, and the announcement that China would train 300 Afghan police

officers. China is also showing signs of willingness to help negotiate a peace agreement as NATO prepares to pull out in two years.

It's a new role for China, as its growing economic might gives it a bigger stake in global affairs. Success, though far from guaranteed, could mean a big payoff for a country hungry for resources to sustain its economic growth and eager to maintain stability in Xinjiang.

"If you are able to see a more or less stable situation in Afghanistan, if it becomes another relatively normal Central Asian state, China will be the natural beneficiary," says Andrew Small, a China expert at The German Marshall Fund of the United States, an American research institute. "If you look across Central Asia, that is what has already happened. ... China is the only actor who can foot the level of investment needed in Afghanistan to make it succeed and stick it out."

Over the past decade, China's trade has boomed with Afghanistan's resource-rich neighbors in Central Asia. For Turkmenistan, China trade reached 21 percent of GDP in 2011, up from 1 percent five years earlier, according to an Associated Press analysis of International Monetary Fund data. The equivalent figure for Tajikistan is 32 percent of GDP, versus 12 percent in 2006. China's trade with Afghanistan stood at a modest 1.3 percent of GDP in 2011.

Eyeing Afghanistan's estimated \$1 trillion worth of unexploited minerals, Chinese companies have acquired rights to extract vast quantities of copper and coal and snapped up the first oil exploration concessions granted to foreigners in decades. China is also eyeing extensive deposits of lithium, uses of which range from batteries to nuclear components.

The Chinese are also showing interest in investing in hydropower, agriculture and construction. Preliminary talks have been held about a direct road link to China across the remote 76-kilometer (47-mile) border between the two countries, according to Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry.

Wang Lian, a Central Asia expert at Beijing University, notes that superpowers have historically been involved in Afghanistan because it is an Asian crossroads - and China would be no exception.

"It's unquestionable that China bears the responsibility to participate in the political and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan," he says. "A stable Afghanistan is of vital importance to (China). China can't afford to stand aside following the U.S. troop withdrawal and in the process of political transition."

A stable Afghanistan, Wang says, is vital to the security of Xinjiang, China's far west where Islamic militants are seeking independence. Some have gained sanctuary and training in Pakistan and along the Pakistan-Afghan border. Beijing fears chaos, or victory by the Taliban, would allow these groups greater leeway.

The U.S. is encouraging Beijing to boost its investment and aid in Afghanistan and backs its participation in various peace-seeking initiatives, including a Pakistan-Afghanistan-China forum that met last month for the second time.

Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman Janan Mosazai says there has been a greater sharing of intelligence between his country and China, and a joint U.S.-Chinese program to mentor junior Afghan diplomats. In one of the only cases of such cooperation in the world, the U.S. brought 15

diplomats to Washington, D.C., last month, after they had received similar training in China. Similar three-way programs are being developed in health and agriculture.

"Recently, China has taken a keener interest in the security situation and the transition process, and we are more than happy that this is increasing," Mosazai says. "It's certainly a change, a welcome change."

He adds that Beijing could play a crucial role in forging peace in Afghanistan because of its close relations to Pakistan, which has long-standing links to the Taliban, whose leadership is widely believed to operate from the country.

Davood Moradian, who heads the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies in Kabul, says the Chinese are treading carefully, realizing they lack expertise in a complex political landscape that has tripped up other great powers.

"The Chinese are ambiguous. They don't want the Taliban to return to power and are concerned about a vacuum after 2014 that the Taliban could fill, but they also don't like having U.S. troops in their neighborhood," he says.

Should the Chinese step into the peace process, either as a principal intermediary or through Pakistan, they could carry considerable weight.

"They are rare among the actors in Afghanistan in that they are not seen as having been too close to any side of the conflict. All sides are happy to see China's expanded role," Small says.

Though China doesn't want a Taliban takeover, Beijing regards the group as a "legitimate political force," says Small. Beijing was on its way to recognizing the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan before the 9/11 attacks that led to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

The Afghan government has backed off from earlier criticism that the Chinese were not contributing their share to security and reconstruction of the country.

"There was an attitude that the Chinese were just interested in profiting from other people's loss, the blood and sweat of American and other troops," says Moradian. "But that is changing."