

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/OA29Df02.html

A US-China entente in Afghanistan

By M K Bhadrakumar

1/31/2013

The involvement of China in the decade-long war on terror in Afghanistan by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been virtually nil. This was so despite the Western alliance's repeated urgings on Beijing to raise its head above the parapet and become an active participant.

The United States doggedly kept at arm's length persistent Russian overtures to become involved in NATO's war - except ruthlessly exploiting them to its selective advantage - but it kept an open mind on a role for China, which, incidentally, used to be its ally supporting the Afghan Mujahideen in the 1980s during the "jihad" against the Soviet army.

Yet, while Moscow responded with alacrity to Washington's need for opening a Northern Distribution Network, Beijing did not even respond to the US's demarche to open the Wakhan Corridor as a transit route for supplying NATO troops in Afghanistan.

The big question is whether all that is going to change now that the Western troop withdrawal from Afghanistan is a foregone conclusion. The signs point towards a more hands-on approach on the part of Beijing over the enterprise of stabilizing Afghanistan in the post-2014 period. In some ways, this also forms part of a reassessment of Chinese policies toward Central Asia.

In retrospect, the visit by Zhou Yongkang, China's security chief and member of the Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee, to Kabul last September signified a shift in the Chinese stance from one of extreme wariness and reserve to one of willingness to become engaged.

Zhou's visit was, of course, the first by a senior Chinese leader in 46 years and, indeed, Beijing pays much attention to formalism in its political culture.

While in Kabul, Zhou signed agreements on increased security and economic cooperation between China and Afghanistan, which included a deal to "train, fund and equip" the 149,000-strong Afghan police, which was until then trained almost exclusively by NATO. Zhou's visit also followed talks held by Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Beijing in June and the agreement reached during the visit on Sino-Afghan cooperation in combating terrorism in the region.

In a statement in Kabul, Zhou had said, "It is in line with the fundamental interests of the two peoples for China and Afghanistan to strengthen a strategic and cooperative partnership which is also conducive to regional peace, stability and development." Beijing would most certainly have taken stock of the resonance of that profound statement made by Zhou from Afghan soil and since decided that the international community found nothing unnatural in it.

Overarching consideration

What could be the considerations underlying the new "proactive" approach in the Chinese policies toward Afghanistan? Evidently, China is a key stakeholder in the stability of Afghanistan. For one thing, the imperatives of the security situation in Xinjiang are such that China's vital interests will be affected if Afghanistan were to become once again the revolving door for international terrorists.

The involvement of militants from the Afghan-Pakistan border regions in subversive activities in Xinjiang is an established fact. Beijing has been putting pressure on Islamabad - even voicing its disquiet in public at times - to clamp down on the Uyghur militants working with the Taliban groups, but it cannot be unaware that a long-term solution to the problem would lie in the stabilization of the Afghan situation.

Again, China's cumulative investments in Central Asia have aggregated over the years to a big enough heap by now that could attract the evil eye and, in turn, bring on obligations on Beijing to assume the role of a provider of security as well. The Central Asia gas pipeline is only the most vivid example of China's growing stakes (and its new vulnerabilities) in that vast region.

Meanwhile, there are also indications that China is reassessing its role in Central Asia against the backdrop of the renewed push by Moscow on Eurasian integration (with indifferent results so far) and the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan and the ebb of US involvement in the region that may ensue.

A recent article in the state-owned Global Times seriously doubted the efficacy of the Moscow-led integration processes in the Central Asian region and suggested that a "multipolar cooperation system involving outside countries would be very attractive for Central Asia". The article focused on the numerous obstacles that come in the way of Russia's attempts to integrate the region and took note of the competing interest of various external players - US, Japan, India, Turkey, Iran, etcera.

Arguably, China does not believe that its regional interests are irreconcilable with the US's. Finally, China's involvement in Afghanistan's economy is rapidly expanding, and the multi-billion Chinese projects and the growing work force that is to be counted in the thousands would require security.

However, in all this an overarching consideration may escape attention. This concerns the overall US-China relationship. Afghanistan promises to be a theater where China can work with the US on regional security issues. Put differently, Afghanistan holds the potential to become a game changer in "the new type of relationship between big powers" that Beijing and Washington have been talking about since the state visit by President Hu Jintao to the US in January last year.

North Korea is a turf where the US-China cooperation has of late dramatically picked up; the Iran nuclear issue has been another area where China has been broadly responsive to the US's core concerns, including the US's sanctions against Iran; again, the possibilities of Washington and Beijing working on a peaceful transition in Syria cannot be ruled out in a foreseeable future.

But the stabilization of Afghanistan falls in a category by itself. It is a regional conflict the resolution of which is of great mutual interest to Washington and Beijing and, more important, China also happens to possess the kind of geopolitical leverage that can make all the difference to the success of the US regional strategy.

Indeed, even a year ago, it would have seemed preposterous to speak of a joint US-China program to mentor the Afghan diplomatic service. Surprisingly, it is not only happening today, but according to a recent Associated Press report, it also happens to be the only one of its kind that Washington has ever partnered with another country.

The AP report disclosed that the US brought 15 Afghan diplomats to Washington, DC, last month "after they had received similar training in China". It would appear that the US and China are pleased with the three-way program of "capacity-building" in Afghanistan to the extent that they are now developing similar joint efforts to cover the fields of health and agriculture.

A strategic asset

However, it is one thing to be involved in "capacity-building" in the civilian sector and another thing to plunge into the crucial elements of the stabilization Afghanistan, which lie in the politico-military domain of security and peacemaking. To be sure, China's "all-weather friendship" with Pakistan becomes a strategic asset for Beijing to emerge, if it chooses, as a key arbiter of peace in the Hindu Kush, given the Taliban's continuing dependence on Pakistani support.

It is an asset on the Afghan chessboard that the US cannot match, as the US-Pakistan relationship is unlikely to regain its traditional closeness anytime soon. Both China and Pakistan take a dim view of the prospects of peace in Afghanistan and both have been critical of the US's war strategy. China supports Pakistan's grievances regarding the US's drone attacks. China also subscribes to the belief that the instability in Pakistan is directly traceable to the US-led war in Afghanistan.

Most important, China is willing (up to a point) to give Pakistan the benefit of doubt as regards the latter's claims of having limitations in resources to crack down on the militant groups.

Having said that, the Chinese assessments of the Afghan situation also reflect differences from the way Pakistan says it sees things. Thus, while Beijing concedes the need to encourage Taliban to return to mainstream Afghan politics as a factor for ensuring durable peace, Chinese commentaries show that Beijing is nowhere near a readiness to countenance a Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.

Indeed, Chinese commentaries express strong disapproval of the Taliban's continued recourse to violence and even question the Taliban's sincerity of purpose. Equally, Beijing appears skeptical of the Pakistani argument that the Taliban have revamped their past ideology and are now willing to co-habitate with other Afghan groups.

Again, the Chinese reports have been highly skeptical regarding the prospects of peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government and implicitly question the wisdom of the Pakistani decision to release Taliban prisoners.

A recent Xinhua commentary even put a question mark about the Afghan government's doctrine of the "good Taliban", pointing out that not a single important Taliban figure has so far taken up Karzai's overtures and switched allegiance - implying that Kabul's "reconciliation" policy is a virtual non-starter, given the Taliban's obduracy that they won't negotiate until the foreign occupation ended.

The bottom line is that the Chinese reports have consistently factored in the formidable obstacles to reaching a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan, "as there are several splintered groups within Taliban and foreign hands supporting specific factions".

Taking all factors into consideration, therefore, China will tread carefully in assuming any lead role in forging peace in Afghanistan, no matter the US's efforts to promote a shift in the Chinese thinking in that direction. Also, certain contradictions remain, which are not easy to reconcile.

While China could be genuine in its keenness to ensure a stable and secure Afghanistan and the Chinese motivations need not be questioned, and although China is showing today greater willingness to work with the US to stabilize Afghanistan, it nonetheless keeps a safe distance from the debris of the war and appears to disfavor a long-term US troop presence in Afghanistan so close to its borders with the Central Asian region. Yet, China was probably considering according diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime in Kabul in 2001 and, but for the 9/11 attacks, it might actually have done so.

Again, while China is deeply concerned about a security vacuum developing in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Western troop withdrawal, it is in no tearing hurry to fill that vacuum (although an expanded role by China could be generally acceptable to the Afghans).

China's security cooperation with Afghanistan so far is limited to intelligence sharing and

training the security personnel, which are no doubt useful but amounts to a mere scratch on the surface of the grave security agenda.

Capitalizing on blood and sweat

On the other hand, the US is manifestly encouraging a stepping up of Chinese participation in peace-seeking initiatives. Washington promoted the creation of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral forum last year, which has so far met twice.

Conceivably, so long as China works on its own steam - instead of, say, riding the chariot of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO] or partnering with Russia - Washington seems to feel no real conflict of interests.

The point is, while China would pay lip service to conceiving a major role for the SCO in stabilizing post-2014 Afghanistan, its real accent continues to be on the bilateral initiatives. From the US viewpoint, this has implications for the big-power rivalries in Central Asia.

Interestingly, China's comfort level is perceptively rising with regard to the US's intentions in Central Asia. An article featured in the Global Times last month noted that "the Pamir mountains are too high and the steppe too far away for the US to focus on the region." It added:

China's ascendant investments in Central Asia are something that also stands in contrast to Russia's declining ones. This is a more complex picture, as Russia, for many of the same reasons as China, has a clear strategic interest in Central Asia. But it is no longer the regional hegemon that it once was. Russia's power has been diluted by growing Chinese interest and Western attention paid to the region as a strategic launching pad into Afghanistan.

Russia may still exert considerable diplomatic influence and soft power in the region, but it is clearly not investing a huge amount in the region. Instead, seen from the ground, the scope and range of Chinese investments is clear, and China is increasingly shaping itself to be the most consequential power in the region.

China is increasingly reshaping Central Asia to becoming its backyard rather than Russia's, and this will bring with it some regional responsibilities that China has not yet figured out how to address. China needs to formulate a proper strategy for Central Asia.

Without doubt, China is unique among the big powers in having the economic wherewithal to commit financial resources to investments and aid on a scale that could make all the difference to the revival of the Afghan economy, and this is indeed a most crucial template of the overall US strategy in the post-2014 period.

Thus, contrary to the earlier whispering campaign that China was only interested in Afghanistan's resources and would be aiming at capitalizing on the blood and sweat of the American and NATO troops, Washington has now veered round to encouraging Beijing to boost its presence and step up investment and aid to Afghanistan. The eagle has decided that the dragon dance in the Hindu Kush can be a many-splendored thing.

