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## China's Role in Post-NATO Afghanistan

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While NATO and the US forces are preparing to withdraw from Afghanistan, the government of Afghanistan is increasingly interested in expanding relations with regional powers such as Russia and China. Conversely, both Moscow and Beijing are concerned about the future of Afghanistan and possible instability in the country after US withdrawal by end of 2014. President Karzai's visit to China is underscoring efforts by the Afghan government to strengthen relations with China and promote regional cooperation on Afghanistan. After a decade-long absence from the Afghan conflict, China is also interested in Afghanistan and is bracing to play a more engaging role in the development and security of the country after 2014.

According to reports, China has expressed interests for investments in extracting oil reserves as the Chinese companies are already considered as the leading investors in the crude Afghan mining sector as well as development projects. In his trip to China, Karzai is set to discuss further expansion of Chinese investments in Afghanistan as well as the country's role in the efforts for stabilizing Afghanistan. Afghan president would also discuss with Chinese officials the Bilateral Security Agreement between Afghanistan and the US that would allow presence of US forces in the country after 2014. As Afghanistan and the US is inching closer to reach a deal over the Kabul-Washington security agreement, Karzai's move in engaging talks with China and other Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members is seen as an attempt to address

concerns of the regional countries regarding the security agreement and prolonged presence of the US in the region.

China's future role is seen as highly important in the international efforts to stabilize the country and develop its fragile economy. China has invested extensively in development projects and mining sector and is expanding its presence in the Afghan market. Rather than economic relations with Afghanistan, China also plays a remarkable role in promoting regional cooperation in supporting the Afghan government. Afghanistan and China upgraded their relations to "strategic level" last year and Afghanistan was granted the status of observer country in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is led by China and Russia. With the US-led international alliance preparing to exit Afghanistan, Chinese officials must have reached the conclusions that the post-2014 security situation in Afghanistan will have a direct impact on China's security.

Closer relations between Afghanistan and China will attract more aid and investments from China which will greatly contribute to Afghanistan's economic development and extraction of the vast untapped underground resources. China could also play a crucial role in supporting Afghanistan in developing its armed forces. Given that China is a powerful member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, it can support development of Afghanistan Afghan security forces through the SCO.

Why China is concerned? The answer is that the regional Security is a prime concern for both Russia and China which are two major members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Beijing now appears to cautiously enhance its diplomatic engagement in the Afghan conflict. The trilateral summit of China, Afghanistan and Pakistan last year, which was hosted by Beijing, was signaling the message that the country is willing to increase its engagement in Afghanistan's security challenges. In the meeting, Chinese diplomats tried to convince the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan to work closely with each other on controlling the tribal and border areas between the two countries.

It is believed that armed Uighur separatists of China, which demand independence of Chinese Muslim region of Xinjiang, a province bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan, are being trained at militants' training centers in those bordering areas. With the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, the operation of the Uighur separatists in the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan is a serious concern for Chinese authorities.

After the US and NATO forces leave Afghanistan, the Afghan security forces may still remain engaged in a war with the Taliban. This will allow the 'Eastern Turkmenistan's Independence Movement' which is seen by Beijing as a terrorist group to seek shelter and find safe havens in Taliban-controlled areas on both sides of Afghan-Pakistani border. Chinese officials also are concerned that continued instability in Afghanistan will increase production of opium and drug trafficking into China through the volatile Xinjiang province of the country.

Another concern for the Chinese officials is stability of Pakistan that is a closest ally to China. The prospect of a prolonged war in Afghanistan and a possible Taliban resurgence could be seen as a potential threat to stability of Pakistan too. A prolonged turmoil in Afghanistan will

unpredictably involve Pakistan, which is considered as a strategic backyard to China. However, instability in Afghanistan would trigger more proxy wars between India and Pakistan on the Afghanistan ground which leaves China in an extremely difficult position.

Given a somehow shared approach by China and the United States over the Afghan conflict, it seems that interests of both sides are other than conflicting in the country. As Western countries, China wants a stable Afghanistan as a regional economic partner and a crude market for Chinese products. On the other hand, Afghanistan's situation closely affects the central Asian States which are neighboring China and have direct impacts on Xinjiang. During the past decade, China has not had a significant place in providing aid assistance to Afghanistan, but it has been one of the leading investors in the country's nascent economy. With the US and NATO exiting from the unpopular Afghan war, China is moving in with its multi-billion dollar investments in the economy of Afghanistan.