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## Can China and India Cooperate in Afghanistan?

**Their border disputes and maritime rivalry aside, China and India may be able to make common cause in Afghanistan.**

By Edward Schwarck  
October 01, 2014

Afghanistan is going out of fashion among governments in the West, as attention shifts to a disintegrating Middle East and a new battlefield in Eastern Europe. But something may be moving in to fill the void. China and India held their first bilateral talks on Afghanistan in April 2013, and discussed the issue most recently during Xi Jinping's visit to New Delhi last week, where both sides agreed to "strengthen strategic dialogue" on building "peace, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan," which was identified as a "shared interest."

The China-India relationship is still riddled with suspicion from the 1962 war, and a smoldering border dispute and rivalry in the maritime sphere complicates relations further. But as Western forces are drawn down in Afghanistan at the end of this year, cooperation may be the best way to establish the regional stability that the country needs for its future growth and security. The pressing question is not, therefore, if such cooperation is desirable, but whether the two Asian giants are capable of working together to produce a robust and viable framework for the country's future.

### Convergence of Interests

Cooperation grows from common interests, and China and India are united in the common threat that both countries face from the surge in terrorism that would likely accompany state collapse in Afghanistan. India perceived a terror threat emanating from the Taliban's Islamic Emirate for much of its existence, and an attack in May on India's consulate in Herat by four heavily armed militants – reportedly members of Pakistan-based Lashkar-i-Taiba – suggests that this threat is still alive. While Beijing is not overtly concerned with instability in Afghanistan (it weathered the Taliban decade by simply closing its borders) spillover into the poorly governed spaces of Central Asia – or worse, Pakistan – could provide a means for terrorist groups to link up with Uyghur fighters in Xinjiang.

Afghanistan also figures in the regional strategies that both countries are unveiling. Beijing's "Silk Road Economic Belt," emerging as a hallmark foreign policy under Xi Jinping, will comprise a cross-border logistics infrastructure linking China's western regions with resource-rich Central Asia and, eventually, the markets of Europe. Meanwhile, India's "Connect Central Asia" policy envisions Afghanistan as a regional trade hub crossed by energy pipelines and air, rail and road links that will one day transport the resources of Central Asia to the subcontinent. In other words, both countries have a vision for Afghanistan and its neighborhood as a thoroughfare for regional trade and prosperity.

Part of this vision is unfolding within Afghanistan, where foreign investment is dominated by Chinese and Indian state-owned enterprises (SOEs). As natural resource hungry developing powers, China and India have significant interests in ensuring market access to Afghanistan's reserves. A Chinese mining company, MCC-Jiangxi Copper, owns a thirty-year lease worth \$3 billion in a copper mine in Mes Aynak and oil giant CNPC is pursuing a joint oil venture with a local partner in Amu Darya. An Indian steel consortium, SAIL-AFISCO, holds a multi-billion dollar stake in an iron-ore mine in Bamyan Province.

### **Lack of Progress**

Despite their common interests, cooperation has been modest so far. Both sides engage in a regular Secretary General-level dialogue on Afghanistan, and the country regularly features in bilateral discussions as part of the China-India Strategic Partnership. But the results of these discussions have not moved beyond joint statements of intent. This is unfortunate because as my RUSI colleague has written previously, a Sino-Indian business dialogue on Afghanistan, for example, could yield cooperation in numerous areas. With investment overwhelmingly led by SOEs, both countries' governments are well positioned to influence company direction and harness it for Afghanistan's long-term stability. A stable Afghanistan would reduce the difficulties that many Chinese and Indian investors currently face on the ground; whether it is insecurity at Mes Aynak; outdated mining legislation in Bamyan; or inadequate transport infrastructure in Amu Darya.

More broadly, while both countries are parties to regional initiatives, including the Heart of Asia Process and various World Bank and Asia Development Bank projects, neither side has yet tried to coordinate their efforts, and there is a wasteful duplication of effort as a result.

In this sense, India's application to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – made at the group's annual summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in early September – is a commendable first step, as it would allow both sides to coordinate on a range of regional economic and security issues. India has long coveted membership in the SCO, which would offer Delhi a platform to push its security and economic interests in Central Asia. With the weight of China and the region behind it, Delhi may also face less recalcitrance from Pakistan, which has long denied it access to the markets and resources of Central Asia, and blocked its logistical arteries to investment projects in Afghanistan. Indeed, it is perhaps not coincidental that on the sidelines of the SCO Summit in Dushanbe, talks were restarted on the TAPI gas pipeline, an ambitious transnational project that would bring gas from Turkmenistan to India, and supply the energy needs and line the tax coffers of fragile transit states like Afghanistan. If this trend continues, China-India cooperation at the regional level could blossom into a more institutionalized pattern of behavior, despite tensions on their land border and at sea.

### **Limits on Cooperation**

Deep mistrust between China and India – which dates back to the 1962 border war – is the most obvious impediment to a functional relationship on Afghanistan. Progress has been made recently in bilateral economic ties and in multilateral institutions such as BRICS. Yet ongoing border clashes – including a nasty recent spat between Chinese and Indian troops in Ladakh – and India's attempt to forge closer military links with Beijing's adversaries in Japan and Vietnam (which Modi and his foreign minister visited respectively in September) suggests that there are limits to China-India bonhomie.

Further, while cooperation on security in Afghanistan would seem obvious because of the shared threat from Islamist extremism, it may actually be the area with the least potential for cooperation. China's Five Principles – particularly that of non-interference – continue to shape Beijing's foreign policy on its western frontier, and it will be loathe to take actions – alone or in conjunction with others – that suck it into the same morass that has trapped NATO for well over a decade. Indeed, China has indicated that it is unwilling to commit troops post-2014, and while it has contributed to training Afghanistan's police force, Beijing has remained silent on the problem of Afghan National Army (ANA) funding, which still faces a shortfall of \$2.5 billion and requires assistance in key areas such as air support and battlefield intelligence to sustain it post-ISAF withdrawal.

By comparison, India has offered more on security, but is also sidestepping the issue of ANA funding, and is instead hedging against the worst-case scenario of state collapse. Delhi recently partially acceded to former President Hamid Karzai's longstanding request for heavy weaponry by agreeing to pay for Russian military equipment to be supplied to Afghan forces from the north (thereby bypassing Pakistan), and may be trying to revive its forward presence in Tajikistan – once India's backdoor to supply the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. India is also working with Russia on refurbishing a Soviet-era armaments factory outside Kabul, and is running training programs for Afghan officers and Special Forces on Indian soil.

While Afghanistan features prominently in both countries' economic strategies, neither China nor India sees it an essential ingredient. Chinese analysts are quick to point out that the Silk Road

Economic Belt does not rely on routes through Afghanistan: pipelines can be laid around the country, and substantial sources of energy and minerals can be found elsewhere. India has made similar calculations: overland trade with Central Asia has been geographically blocked for decades by Pakistan and, in any case, a partial solution to this problem may have been found in the developing Iranian port of Chabahar, which is being built on \$100 million of Indian investment, and which promises to become a new trade and logistics link with Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Finally, the role of other regional powers will be decisive in defining the scope of China-India cooperation. Above all, their differing relationships with Pakistan are a source of continued suspicion. Delhi is often infuriated by Chinese nuclear and missile transfers to Islamabad and activities in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir, and both countries have radically different views on the capacity of the Pakistani state to control the region's terrorist networks. Admittedly, China will never discuss Pakistan without the latter being present, but Beijing is trying to facilitate better relations between Delhi and Islamabad, including through a recently proposed trilateral security arrangement and joint SCO membership. Russia, meanwhile, which has consistently applied the brakes to regional free trade agreements and funding mechanisms – including those proposed through the SCO – would look askance at any move that increases China-India preponderance in Central Asia.

### **The Bottom Line**

China and India do not see eye to eye on many issues, but there is a growing convergence of interests in Afghanistan and the region. That both sides are willing to engage despite their tensions is commendable, and should be supported. As Western forces draw down in Afghanistan, a new China-India led regional multilateralism may be important in reenergizing the region and providing the opportunities for the prosperity and security that will underpin Afghanistan's future. Yet given that neither country is interested in security provision, these efforts are unlikely to be decisive – at least in the short-term. A solution to Afghanistan's problems must begin within the country, and a strong Western security commitment post-2014 will be just as important.