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China key to Afghan endgame

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31 May 2011

The affairs of Afghanistan and Pakistan are becoming the biggest test of whether the United States and China can cooperate to maintain global peace and stability in the 21st century.

They are an even bigger test of this than the Korean Peninsula, for the security equation there is largely frozen, whereas in Afghanistan and Pakistan it is very volatile indeed, as circumstances surrounding the death of Osama bin Laden have emphasised. The future of Afghanistan is also a test of other great-power relationships that will largely define the 21st century in Asia: Of whether China and India are doomed to mutual hostility or can find areas of cooperation; and of whether the Chinese-Russian relationship will become a true partnership that will seek common solutions □ to key problems.

As the United States moves toward a withdrawal of its ground forces from Afghanistan, the role of the region is bound to become increasingly important. The question now is whether Washington is prepared to accommodate its wishes to those of other powers in the area, and help broker a regional settlement for Afghanistan in which the United States will be only one player among several. China, along with Pakistan, India, Russia and Iran, has a critical role to play. It borders Afghanistan, albeit for only a few miles. China's possession of a huge Muslim territory in Xinjiang makes it acutely conscious of the threat of extremism both to its own territory and to former Soviet Central Asia. China has committed itself to far the biggest commercial investment in Afghanistan – \$3 billion in the Aynak copper mine.

Finally, China has a very great stake in Pakistan, which is indeed China's only real ally in the world. The importance of this relationship has been emphasised by statements of support for Pakistan from Beijing in the wake of Bin Laden's death, and the visit of Pakistan's Prime Minister, Yousuf Raza Gilani, to China. Reports from Kabul say that Pakistan has been encouraging the Karzai administration to look to Beijing, not Washington, as a future sponsor.

Many Pakistanis are now open in their desire that China replace the United States as Pakistan's main international backer. China's aid to Pakistan is still considerably exceeded by that of the United States, but China has become a key provider of military equipment to Pakistan, and has also invested heavily in Pakistani infrastructure.

China's stake in Pakistan is threefold. There is the desire dating back to the 1960s to use Pakistan as balance against India, with which China has a major border dispute and that China regards as a potential rival. China has also used Pakistan as a link to groups in the region. Finally, China is building up energy routes from the Gulf via Pakistan to insure China against any future naval blockade by the United States or India. At the same time, China is by no means unconditionally committed to Pakistan, and this should give Washington room for maneuver. Beijing has in fact played a rather cautious hand, keeping its aid limited. Both the corruption and incompetence of the Pakistani state and the spread of Islamist insurgency in Pakistan have made Beijing wary of a deeper commitment.

It is extremely unlikely, though, that China will join the US in pressuring Pakistan to accede to the US version of an Afghan peace settlement. Rather, if Washington swings round to the idea of negotiating a deal with the Taleban and using Pakistan as a mediator, China's ability to influence Islamabad will be of great importance. For this to happen, however, Washington will have to persuade India to limit its own ambitions in Afghanistan; and China will also have to help bring Russia and Iran on board.

Up to now, China seems to have assumed that it could do separate deals with the Taleban and their allies to exclude Uighur militants, and that it may be able to do the same kind of deal to defend the Aynak mine. This is a mistake.

While American and Indian hopes that the Taleban can be defeated in the Pashtun areas are clearly impossible, so too are Taleban hopes of sweeping to power in the whole of Afghanistan. The US, India and Russia will make sure that, as before 9/11, non-Pashtun armies continue to defend their own areas against the Taleban. This is a recipe for unending civil war – which is no recipe for successful copper production and export.

Another reason why China should help seek an Afghan peace settlement is for the sake of Pakistan's stability. Continued war in Afghanistan will mean continued radicalisation in Pakistan.

This in turn will increase the risk that Pakistan-based terrorists will strike at the US or India. Especially following Bin Laden's death, a terrorist attack with links to Pakistan would so infuriate Americans that retaliation against Pakistan would be a real possibility, and no concern either for the risks or for US relations with China would prevent this.

If China truly cares about Pakistan's survival, it should be doing everything possible to get the Pakistanis to prevent international terrorism based on their soil.