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Chinese troops offer an Afghan solution

By Francesco Sisci
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BEIJING - On August 11, [China's](#) People's Liberation Army (PLA) kicked off its largest military maneuver in decades. About 50,000 troops, drawn from each of the seven military commands, were deployed by "rail and [air transport](#)" to unfamiliar territories far from their garrison training bases. The goal of the exercise was "to improve [the PLA's] capacity of long-range projection", reported the official Chinese news agency Xinhua.

The PLA, therefore, was not staging maneuvers to prepare for a hypothetical invasion of Taiwan, as it has done in many of its past exercises. Those "Taiwan maneuvers" had very little practical use, as many generals have conceded that even if China were to attack the island, it would do so through rockets and missiles, not by trying to land thousands of soldiers on Taiwan's beaches.

Those maneuvers served only to exert psychological pressure on the Taiwanese population. It worked to a small degree, in the sense that the Taiwanese were scared, but it backfired in that the Taiwanese were not intimidated into submitting to China, conversely, they were convinced to resist China's reunification pulls.

Since those self-defeating initiatives, the PLA has become smarter, but it still has political goals behind each of its announced maneuvers. In this case, the PLA is thinking of long-range projection - that is, sending troops out of Chinese territory for special purposes. The one territory that needs troops and where Chinese soldiers could be deployed is Afghanistan.

With its latest exercises, China could be winking at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States - both of which are presently engaged in Afghanistan - saying, we have troops, they are trained, and we could send them over.

NATO needs more troops in Afghanistan. Even though the combined number of foreign

troops there now stands at about 100,000, the territory is infamously mountainous and inhospitable. It is twice as big as Italy, and slightly smaller than the US state of [Texas](#).

With 33 million people, over half of them below the age of 25, the country's median age is 17.6; that is, over half of the population has been born and raised seeing nothing but war. Over 80% of the population is illiterate, yet most of the men are proud owners of rifles which they have used many times.

Much of the economy is based on drug trafficking (according to estimates, Afghanistan produces some 70% of the world's total opium output) and international aid - two polluting elements in any society and even more so in a country torn by war for the past 30 years.

In this situation, given the restive and hostile Taliban and the tribal leaders waging war on the Kabul [government](#), the number of troops deployed is a pittance.

In addition to the about 100,000 foreign troops, there are "contract workers" (that is, mercenaries working for Kabul) who could number as many as 40,000. The present objective of the Barack [Obama administration](#) is to raise the Afghan security forces to as many as 250,000.

The grand, optimistic total would thus be about 400,000 troops to police a land across which are scattered at least 10 million young, angry, illiterate, toughened and armed men. By comparison, Italy, with no real insurgency to speak of, and about 60 million inhabitants, has over 600,000 police and troops confronting just a few thousand armed criminals in a territory half the size.

Such comparisons are difficult, but certainly these numbers tell us that in no way can even 400,000 troops bring security to Afghanistan in the present situation. And the figure of 400,000 is very optimistic for many reasons, such as taking for granted the loyalty of the Afghan troops.

In this situation, even if China were to send 50,000 troops - all of those which took part in the August maneuver - it would make a difference, but not enough of one. As much as it needs more boots on the ground, Kabul needs a better political settlement along its borders to make those boots effective.

The first problem is Pakistan. The country is a well-established haven for the Taliban, who can cross the porous border at will to launch raids into Afghanistan.

Pakistan's intelligence and security forces have for a long time trained and financed the militancy in divided Kashmir, where jihadis cross into Indian-administered Kashmir to tackle Indian security forces. [1] Technically, Pakistan has stopped supporting these jihadis, but it still keeps an eye on them, thus keeping alive channels of communication and collaboration.

Many of these Kashmiri militants have good connections with the Afghan Taliban, in many cases they are the same people - they pray in the same mosques, studied in the same

madrassas (seminaries), and they can fight just as well in Kashmir as in Afghanistan. In this way, the Pakistani security forces, by helping the Kashmiri cause, also help the Taliban cause.

Pakistan makes no secret that it doesn't like the Kabul government, which it considers too "pro-New Delhi", and it is no secret that Islamabad fears being squeezed by India controlling Afghanistan. In this way, it is in Pakistan's best interests to keep the Kashmiri insurgency alive, at least to prod the Indians and have more bargaining chips with them - it is also in Pakistan's interests to "liven up" things in Afghanistan.

Indeed, the situation might be too lively for Pakistan's own good, as the Taliban have established control in much of the tribal areas. However, while high temperatures are dangerous, they also mean greater American attention, thus more aid and more Pakistani political leverage in [Washington](#).

Even poppy cultivation has a place in this puzzle. The poppies are cultivated in Afghanistan, but reach the world with the help of people in Pakistan and Iran, who are lining their pockets and who thus allow the situation to fester. An eradication policy for opium poppies must be found, but enforcing it will only be possible if the traffickers are curtailed.

In sum, if there is no political solution with Pakistan that conclusively stops its support of Kashmiri or Taliban militants, Afghanistan will never be at peace.

Afghanistan was peaceful only before the Soviet invasion of 1979, when the country kept a balance with its neighbors and relied heavily on Pakistan. After the Soviets - Cold War allies of the Indians - invaded Afghanistan, Islamabad felt it was being squeezed and fought hard and successfully to draw the Americans into the conflict.

Even now, if Pakistan is not totally on the side of the foreign troops in Afghanistan, the Taliban will never be stopped. Seeking security in Afghanistan in the present situation would be like trying to empty a bathtub full of water by opening the drain but keeping the faucet running.

One solution for the US in Afghanistan would be to simply pull out and entrust the Pakistanis with overall security, while keeping a watchful eye on developments in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This was the situation in the 1990s, except the US simply forgot to monitor developments, didn't heed the cries for help from Pakistan, and things went awry, with the Taliban coming to power in 1996.

Ideally, Pakistan and India should find a solution to the Kashmir problem. This would start a circle of bilateral trust which would lead to the militants being stopped. But no solution has been found for Kashmir in over 60 years, so we can hardly hope for a resolution now.

Less ideally but more practically, China could send troops to [Afghanistan](#) and open a comprehensive regional dialogue on Afghanistan, involving also the Russians and the Iranians - besides the Americans, Pakistanis and Afghans.

The value of Chinese troops on the ground could be political. In the past 60 years, China has been an unflinching Pakistani ally, and its presence on the ground could be a pledge to keep Afghanistan in "Pakistani hands". On the other hand, India should agree to leave Afghanistan to Pakistan, in return for a Pakistani back-down over Kashmir. This latter agreement would be very difficult, but it could be helped by the Indians agreeing to Chinese troops in Afghanistan.

All this would not only serve the purpose of having more foot soldiers on the ground, it would serve the Pakistani interest of wresting Afghanistan from the Taliban's hands. Pakistan should close the faucet so the flood of militants will dry up.

Without a political solution and a political goal, any military solution will by definition be defeated.

The above reasoning is based on a political goal: to minimize the Taliban's insurgency so much that Afghanistan can safely be crossed by pipelines, roads, goods and tourists. This is regardless of who rules in Kabul - whether it is current President Hamid Karzai or anyone else, or whether the government is a democracy or something else.