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China denies establishing military base in Afghanistan

An article in the *South China Morning Post* last week suggesting that China was establishing a military base in north-eastern Afghanistan provoked a flurry of articles in the US and international press inflating the Chinese military role. While the report was quickly denied by Kabul and Beijing, it is clear that Afghanistan is another key arena for intensifying geo-political rivalry between the major powers.

The article claimed that around 500 Chinese troops would be sent to a base in Afghanistan's strategic Wakhan Corridor—a narrow sliver of inhospitable land between Tajikistan and Pakistan that also borders China. A source told the newspaper: "Construction on the base has started, and China will send at least one battalion of troops, along with weapons and equipment, to be stationed there and provide training to their Afghan counterparts."

Beijing is seeking to crack down on Uyghur separatists from the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) that reportedly have bases in Afghanistan, as well as Tajikistan, and prevent them crossing into China's western Xinjiang region. Within Xinjiang, the Chinese regime is engaged in widespread repression against any expression of separatism among the Muslim Uyghur minority.

The article also noted a report in January by the Russian-based Ferghana News that China would finance a new military base in Badakhshan, which includes the Wakhan Corridor, after the Afghan and Chinese defence ministers agreed last year to collaborate in fighting terrorism.

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The Afghanistan embassy in Beijing sent a fax to the *South China Morning Post* declaring that “there will be no Chinese military personnel of any kind on Afghan soil at any time.” It noted that China was assisting Afghanistan to set up a mountain brigade as part of counter-terrorism efforts in the country’s north. Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying also dismissed the report as “not true.”

Both Beijing and Kabul are well aware that the stationing of Chinese troops in Afghanistan, even on a limited basis, would provoke opposition from Washington and its allies, which have been engaged in a bloody military occupation of the country since 2001. Far from “fighting terrorism,” the US has sought to transform Afghanistan into a base of operations in Central Asia aimed against Russia and China.

A Chinese military base would also be opposed by India, which, under the aegis of its strategic partnership with the US, has sought to expand its influence in South Asia, including in Afghanistan. India regards Afghanistan as vital to strengthening its strategic position against regional rival Pakistan which has long borders with both India and Afghanistan. New Delhi also regards Beijing as a major adversary, as recent acute military tensions in the Dokham Plateau border area between the two countries have underscored.

Significantly, Andrew Cordesman, a US strategist closely tied to the military-intelligence apparatus, downplayed reports of a Chinese military base, saying only that “China does seem to have some role in a training facility or small base in the Wakhan Corridor.” His comment entitled “Are Russia and China sabotaging American policy in Afghanistan?” concluded that “Russian and Chinese roles in Afghanistan are much more driven by self-interest than hostility [to the US].”

China and Russia have both sought to find a way to end the protracted conflict in Afghanistan, concerned that it will destabilise Central Asia which they regard as their strategic backyard. A planned peace conference organised by Russia for September 4 was postponed at the last minute on a request by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

China is part of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group that includes Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United States which is part of stalled efforts to end fighting in Afghanistan. The *Financial Times* reported today that China has met secretly with Afghan Taliban leaders several times over the past year in a bid to broker a peace.

China and Russia have also sought to involve Afghanistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation established in 2001 to counter US influence in Central Asia. Members include some of the Central Asian Republics as well as Pakistan and India since last year. Afghanistan has attended meetings of the organisation as an observer since 2012.

China has significantly boosted its ties with Afghanistan especially since 2012 as the US was winding back its troop numbers. Beijing feared not only greater instability in Afghanistan, but also in neighbouring Pakistan where China is engaged in the \$67 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor infrastructure project linking China to the Pakistani port of Gwadar. It is a centrepiece of Beijing's broader Belt and Road Initiative aimed at connecting the Eurasian landmass by sea and land.

A *Diplomat* article in June entitled "Is China bringing peace to Afghanistan?" explained: "In the 2002–13 period Beijing provided just \$240 million in aid to Afghanistan. In 2014 alone China gave it \$80 million in aid and pledged an additional \$240 million over the next three years. In September 2017, China extended \$90 million towards development projects in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province alone.

"China is Afghanistan's biggest foreign investor now. It is interested mainly in resource extraction and infrastructure building. It has started extracting oil from the Amu Darya basin in northern Afghanistan. In the telecommunications sector, China's role has grown from supplying Afghanistan with telecom equipment in 2007 to the construction of fibre-optic links in 2017."

Afghanistan has large mineral deposits that China needs for its huge manufacturing industries. In significant areas, however, investment plans have stalled. Chinese companies won a \$3 billion contract to extract copper from the Mes Aynak mines in 2008, but little progress has been made due to continuing instability in the area.

The US, which retains some 15,000 troops in Afghanistan, certainly has no intention of securing Chinese investment in the country or encouraging a greater presence. The media reaction to an unsubstantiated report that China is establishing a small base in northern Afghanistan highlights the fact that Washington is determined retain its grip over the strategically-located country.

The hype about Chinese military expansion is being used as the pretext for the US to boost its presence throughout the Indo-Pacific region. China earlier this year opened its first external military base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa capable of hosting up to an estimated 10,000 troops. By contrast, the US has a world-wide network of hundreds of bases and basing agreements with well over 200,000 military personnel backed by warplanes, warships, armour and missile systems.