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What Now for China's Afghanistan Strategy?

By Andrew Small
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Despite the blow to peace talks with the Taliban, China is unlikely to change its approach to Afghanistan or Pakistan.

The events following Mullah Omar's death represent a setback for Chinese policy in Afghanistan. The indefinite postponement of reconciliation talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the bloody series of attacks mounted in Kabul by the Taliban's new leadership, and the subsequent breakdown of President Ashraf Ghani's outreach to Pakistan are blows to a peace process that Beijing had worked hard to shepherd along.

Along with advances in northern Afghanistan by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) — the principal host for Uyghur militants in the region — and the Taliban's own battlefield successes, the strategic situation for China appears to be moving in an adverse direction. Beijing's longstanding concern that Afghanistan might become a safe haven for "East Turkestan terrorists" is now coupled with worries about the dangers that instability there could pose to Beijing's various Silk Road economic schemes, particularly in Central Asia and Pakistan. Despite speculation that these might be imperiled by China's current economic frailty, this multi-trillion-dollar bonanza for Chinese industry is, if anything, only rendered more important.

An inevitable question, therefore, is whether Beijing can be expected to lean on its all-weather friend, Pakistan, to take action against the Taliban. For all that the Afghan government would like China to step up its direct bilateral economic and security support, it is Beijing's leverage

over Islamabad that they see as its most valuable asset. China played an important role in encouraging Pakistan to bring a reluctant Taliban to the table for the peace talks in Murree. And since the Kabul attacks, the Afghan government has sought Chinese assistance in pressing Pakistan to take the actions demanded in its "non-paper", such as denying sanctuary and passage to Taliban fighters.

Beijing is well aware that Ghani's Pakistan opening left him out on a political limb. In the absence of deliverables, relations between Islamabad and Kabul are heading into a phase that risks being characterized by "freeze, deep freeze, or hostility," in Ghani's words. China has sympathy for the Afghan government's position, and is certainly concerned to help keep its relationship with Pakistan from breaking down further. But while Kabul's previous efforts to leverage Beijing's position of influence in Islamabad were relatively successful, it is now running into the limits of what China is willing to do.

Beijing is cautious about its own relationship with the Taliban. In meetings with its representatives, China has sought to persuade them that a peace deal will be in their interests, but also to keep the two sides' longstanding ties in good working order. Beijing continues to see the Taliban as a political force that it needs to deal with, and is wary about turning them into enemies. Encouraging Pakistan to twist arms to get the Taliban into peace talks was one thing — any perception that they were pushing Pakistan to take more decisive action against the group would be quite another. The backlash China faced after it was blamed for instigating the Pakistani government's assault on the Red Mosque in 2007 is a cautionary tale that still resonates with Chinese officials.

But it is not just fear of getting on the wrong side of the Taliban that is holding China back. The ISI's current attempts to help consolidate the position of the Taliban's new leader, Mullah Mansour, are fully in line with China's view of its own interests. Beijing does not want to see the Taliban fractured, operating under the control of opponents of reconciliation talks, or actively hostile to Pakistan. China sees the maintenance of a relatively coherent Taliban movement as a necessary evil if a political deal in Afghanistan is ever going to be reached, and if its own arrangements with the group are to remain intact. The internal tensions that have roiled the Taliban in recent weeks are partly a product of their involvement in the Murree talks, and Pakistani pressure to bring them to the table. Having delivered on its promise to get them in the room, Beijing is now likely to leave the ISI with the time and space to deal with the resulting fallout.

Mullah Mansour may never have Mullah Omar's authority, but if the Taliban can be broadly unified behind a figure close to the Pakistanis and willing to approve peace talks — in principle, if not currently in practice — this is about the most that China could currently hope for. Conversely, a scenario in which the Pakistani government decided to turn on the Afghan Taliban (not that this is on the cards) would pose serious risks for the security situation in Pakistan, and likely make China itself into a target too. Beijing has already gone through eight years of this experience with the Pakistani Taliban. And with the rise of forces such as the Islamic State that are explicitly hostile to China, a cohesive Taliban under Pakistan's continued influence looks like a safer bet.

In the end, despite the serious hits that the prospects for peace have taken in recent weeks, China still believes that a negotiated political settlement in Afghanistan is the only viable solution. Beijing will expect Pakistan, in due course, to do its part to facilitate it. If the Afghan government were facing an immediate, existential security crisis, China's stance might look different but, although the Afghan National Security Forces have faced a worryingly high attrition rate this year, they continue to hold their own, and there is no looming prospect of the Taliban "victory" that Beijing would certainly not want to see. For now then, China is trying to hold together its existing strategy in Afghanistan rather than embarking on a new one. However unpalatable it might seem in Kabul as civilian casualties reach record highs, that will mean Beijing giving the Pakistanis time, not turning the screw on them.