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Foreign Policy

## China's Afghan Moment

By Andrew Small

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As the United States draws down in Afghanistan, China is finally moving in.



Until recently, Beijing's policy in Afghanistan could be characterized as masterful inactivity: It sat on the sidelines of a war that it wanted neither side to win. But the late September visit by security chief Zhou Yongkang, the first by a senior Chinese leader in almost five decades, is the most visible sign that the U.S. 2014 withdrawal date is bringing that spectator status to an end.

As the United States dials down its goal of defeating the Taliban, China could become Afghanistan's most important mediator and investor.

Since the 9/11 attacks, China's goals in Afghanistan have been almost entirely negative: no victory for the West, nor for extremists; no long-term U.S. bases and no terrorist training camps for Uighur separatists. Most importantly, the Chinese wanted no serious involvement in Afghanistan. With the exception of its large but painfully slow-moving Aynak copper-mine project, China has steered clear of anything beyond a token presence in Afghanistan's economic, security, or political affairs. Fearing the reaction in the Islamic world if it were visibly associated with the Western-led war effort, yet not wanting to poison its relations with the West by rooting for the insurgency, Beijing has treated Afghanistan as a neighbor in name only. China has denied Afghanistan, separated by a mountainous sliver of land and a tiny border kept as closed and undeveloped as possible, the political attention and largesse that such a strategically significant country might have expected.

But the looming U.S. drawdown has changed this calculus. After years of fretting about encirclement, Chinese officials are instead now urging the United States to withdraw responsibly. China fears that the rapid drawdown of NATO troops could lead to civil war, an escalation of proxy battles among Afghanistan's neighbors, and the destabilization of the wider region -- most worryingly, Pakistan. Reluctant though Beijing is to assume responsibility for preventing any of these scenarios, it has accepted that sitting on its hands is no longer an adequate strategy.



But Beijing lacks the usual Western tools of nation-building. It has no tradition of providing large volumes of aid, its limited peacekeeping force has no experience in combat, and its international training programs remain weak. One participant from the Afghan National Police dismissively described his experience on a Chinese anti-narcotics course as "being taken on a visit to Xinjiang and lectured about China's reform and opening policy." No wonder that instead of getting more involved directly, Beijing is instead using its economic clout and its leverage over Pakistan and the Taliban to expand its influence in Afghanistan.

China's relationship with the reclusive head of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, goes back to his rule over Afghanistan in the late 1990s. Among the only non-Muslims to meet with Omar, Chinese officials promised political recognition and support in the shape of telecom projects and other investments. In return, the Afghan side promised that its territory would not be used by "separatist forces" to launch attacks against China. The 9/11 attacks curtailed the relationship, but the essentials of the deal remain in place. China has maintained its contacts with the Quetta

Shura, the top leadership of the Afghan Taliban; Chinese and Pakistani officials I've spoken to over the last year say that contacts are increasing. Although Beijing fears the radicalizing consequences of a full resumption of Taliban control, it is far more comfortable than any Western actor in dealing with the group as a political force.

Any Chinese influence over the Taliban ultimately comes through Pakistan, its closest friend in the region. Unlike the mutual mistrust that characterizes ties between Pakistan and the United States, Pakistan's relationship with China commands deep support across the Pakistani political spectrum. Beijing expects Pakistan to accommodate and protect its interests in Afghanistan and its preferences over the country's political future. As one former Chinese official who remains closely involved in the discussions put it: "We want to see a balance of power in Afghanistan, and we've been telling the Pakistanis that they shouldn't be an obstacle to that.... We have our ways to influence them if necessary."

Beijing's stance is partly the result of its improving relationship with Kabul, including its intelligence services. In recent years, Afghan officials have successfully raised doubts among their Chinese counterparts about how comprehensively China should be relying on its friends in Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency when it comes to dealing with Uighur militant groups. After decades in which China's intelligence in the region has been filtered through Pakistan, Beijing is starting to see advantages in diversification.

The shifting trilateral ties among China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan over the last year are one of the clearest signs of Beijing's willingness to play an enlarged political role as 2014 approaches. Afghanistan's most immediate reward has been its systematic upgrade in China's regional diplomacy. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Central Asian security and economic bloc that China founded in 2001, admitted Afghanistan as an observer at its June summit in Beijing. Afghan President Hamid Karzai signed a new strategic partnership agreement with China on the same trip. In February, Beijing finally greenlighted a trilateral meeting process with Pakistan and Afghanistan, which will increase its role in mediating between the two sides.

September's "surprise" visit to Kabul was even more striking. Members of the Politburo Standing Committee, China's top decision-making body, often visit seemingly insignificant states -- over the last three years, the committee's No. 2 member, Wu Bangguo, visited Fiji, Namibia, and the Bahamas. Not only was Zhou's trip the first to Afghanistan by a Standing Committee member in 46 years, but he represents China's security and intelligence apparatus, rather than one of the softer faces of Chinese economic diplomacy. Zhou discussed terrorism and border security, and he announced a deal for China's Ministry of Public Security to "train, fund, and equip Afghan police," demonstrating Beijing's intention to be a player in Afghanistan's dark arts as well as its commercial ones.

Beijing's unusually healthy relationships with all sides to the conflict underpin its greatest contribution: long-term investments that have a better chance of being left in peace. The company operating the \$3 billion Aynak copper deal, Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC), has been understandably skittish about the occasional rocket attack, even though its facility has never been subjected to a major assault. Accounts from Chinese officials suggest that MCC's reluctance to move ahead with the contract -- like the reluctance of other Chinese

companies to sink money into Afghanistan -- has been as much about not wanting to be identified with the U.S. war effort as direct security concerns. But that political context is changing.

Trade between China and Afghanistan remains a modest \$234 million, albeit increasing from barely \$25 million in 2000. China previously saw economic activities, especially those on a large scale, as providing ballast to a long-term U.S. presence in the country and therefore best pursued slowly or not at all. Now, with 2014 approaching, the spigots are starting to open again. After four years in which no significant contracts were signed, the last 12 months saw a major oil exploration bid accepted on terms sufficiently generous to the Afghan government as to imply that the contract will be the first of many.

The United States has been asking China for years to do more to incorporate Afghanistan into the region's political and economic order. Now that U.S. troops are heading for the exits, China has finally acceded. But unlike the far-off United States, once China commits serious political and economic resources to the country, no one expects it to leave.