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Herald

**"We are doing all the fighting but China will
Win the peace"**

By Harry Reid

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Are British troops in Afghanistan in effect fighting for China?

Will Afghanistan soon be no more than a Chinese province? These questions are prompted by yesterday's meeting in Beijing between China's leader, Hu Jintao, and President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan.

Mr Hu spoke of his country's strengthening relationship with Afghanistan, and predicted that the "comprehensive partnership" between the two countries would soon be taken to new levels. So what is going on? Is it a case of the British and the Americans fighting the battles, and the Chinese winning the war?

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China has a border with Afghanistan. It is a tiny border, yet it is hugely significant. Just north of the Hindu Kush and the magnificent Karakoram Mountains, a thin finger of Afghan territory reaches across to the Xinjiang region of China. This gives the Chinese direct and invaluable access to Afghanistan.

Chinese engineers, construction workers, economic advisers and diplomats are already working hard in Afghanistan. They are preparing for an immense infrastructural push that will gain momentum as soon as the Nato forces leave.

They are getting ready to exploit the rich Afghan resources of copper, iron ore and, most important of all, natural gas. They are planning major new railways and roads. These projects will, of course, benefit the Afghan people, but they will mainly benefit the Chinese.

Indeed, the Chinese have worked out what so many foreign powers who have invaded Afghanistan in the past, right up to the Nato forces who are currently there, have not properly understood: sinewy diplomacy and practical economic co-operation are needed, as well as military power.

What is galling in this scenario is that the way is being paved for future Chinese economic success in Afghanistan by American and European troops, including, of course, brave British troops. I have no great confidence in the leaders of Britain or any other European country, but I thought President Barack Obama had at least some idea of what he was doing and where he was going.

Why, then, is this Nobel peace prize-winner, a man who in American terms is very much a dove, able to endorse the military “surge” tactics in Afghanistan? Surely it cannot be that America is already so in hock to China that it is now willing to do China’s military work by proxy?

That may seem a far-fetched theory, but it is otherwise hard to explain why the Americans are committing so many troops in Afghanistan on an intensive short-term mission without a clearly defined long-term strategy. As in Iraq, there seems to be no coherent US plan for when the “war” is over, apart from quitting as quickly as possible – and then leaving Afghanistan to the Chinese. We all know that power is swinging from the west to the east at a bewildering pace but I hadn’t realised that we had got to the stage where the Americans are prepared to do the dirty military work in advance of the Chinese moving in.

Of course the Chinese may not have it all their own way. They will be wary of the dangers of Islamist insurgencies, perhaps even within China itself – for example, in Xinjiang region. Militant Islamists will soon hate the Chinese every bit as much as they hate the Americans. And the Chinese are very worried indeed about growing instability in Pakistan. But here, too, they are making themselves ever more useful, not as fighters or policemen but as engineers and builders, though they are perhaps less welcome in Pakistan than they are in Afghanistan.

Immediately south of Afghanistan is the very poor and very volatile Balochistan area of Pakistan, which has a long littoral along the Arabian Sea, east of the Gulf of Oman. Here the Chinese are close to completing a vast new deep-water port at Gwadar, where they have also helped to develop a major new international airport. This is sovereign Pakistani territory but Iran is just along the coast to the west.

The Chinese have not helped to construct the new facilities at Gwadar simply out of goodwill towards Pakistan. They intend that the port will give them access to the Indian Ocean and to the world's key oil-shipping routes. Major road and rail links north through Balochistan to Afghanistan and on to China itself would allow them to import oil through supertankers docking at the Gwadar facility.

In strategic terms, both the seaport and the airport could be of immense importance to the Chinese as they continue to tighten their grip on this pivotal area between the Middle East and the Far East. We need a new generic name for this crucial region, encompassing Eastern Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Superstan?

The notion of an “oil corridor” through southern Pakistan and Afghanistan to China may make good sense for the Chinese but it greatly alarms neighbouring India, and it would also be vulnerable to Baloch insurgents who are becoming ever more militant.

They do not like their own Pakistan government, such as it is, and they certainly don't like the Chinese. Balochistan is the most deprived part of Pakistan and its growing strategic significance makes it ideal territory for those who wish to destabilise the entire region.

The Chinese are rapidly gaining influence in many parts of the world through their burgeoning economic power. But that escalating power will require continued energy supplies from beyond China to sustain it. The irony is that as China becomes the world's pre-eminent superpower, it will become ever more vulnerable, both internally and externally.

In the next two or three years, the way that the politics of this volatile region, with Afghanistan at its heart, shake out will determine the future of the globe itself. One thing is already clear: the Chinese are all over it, not as short-term soldiers, but as the far-sighted orchestrators of the future.