

# The good neighbour: China's alternative strategy in Afghanistan



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## BASED ON ITS

'FIVE PRINCIPLES OF PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE' CHINA ADOPTED THE "GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD" POLICY (MULIN WAIJIAO) IN THE LAST TWO DECADES, AIMED AT ESTABLISHING POLITICAL RELATIONS

China and Afghanistan, which are connected geographically by the 200 km Wakhan Corridor, have been enjoying a relatively cordial and functional relationship since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. However, despite increasing bilateral interactions, trade, and assistance, it seems that Beijing is only showing limited interest in the reconstruction and reconciliation process of Afghanistan. It seems however, that many Afghans do not mind China keeping a low profile. Thus it is not surprising that China enjoys high popularity among Kabul's elite. Despite being quite silent on the ever evolving political landscape in Afghanistan, China has been able to boost high profile investments. Beijing not only exhibits good economic relations with Afghanistan, but is also able to outmanoeuvre its Western competitors, which believe they possess the 'moral first right' regarding economic cooperation with Afghanistan and the exploitation of its vast resources. The discrepancy between China's goal to maximise profit in Afghanistan and its commitment and responsibility toward the safety and well-being of the Afghan people has aroused the international community, which feels like it has to carry the whole load without reaping the benefits. It seems blatantly clear, having China's basic principle of 'change through trade' in mind, as well as its foreign policy doctrine of 'non-interference in domestic issues' that several observers perceive Beijing's role in Afghanistan as primarily economic. Especially Western

critics accuse Beijing of being a 'free rider', doing business in Afghanistan at the expense of the US and its allies. Ensuring a stable and secure environment, a process in which NATO's ISAF mission has lost a lot of lives and material resources, is undeniably a precondition for China's economic success. The fact that until today, China has refused to take part in any direct military engagement and is avoiding involvement in international joint efforts aimed at building a stable Afghanistan seems to support these accusations. But overall, this only reflects part of the story. Beijing's approach towards Kabul has been traditionally twofold: trade and security. First of all, China has a history of political involvement in Afghanistan. It condemned the soviet invasion and subsequently Beijing supported the Afghan resistance (Mujahideen movement) with its greatest regional ally Pakistan in order to counter the threat of Soviet encirclement. Later, during the civil war, China started to assist the Taliban but did not go so far as to recognise the newly established regime in Kabul. China's decision to switch sides and support the Northern Alliance in the ongoing conflict against the 'Pakistan-friendly' Taliban further deteriorated the relationship with Islamabad.

This determined a political change much in the interest of Washington, which is feeling today more and more uncomfortable with China's engagement in Afghanistan. However besides this temporary trilateral diplomatic low, Beijing normalised its relationship with the

Taliban to a certain degree and subsequently mollified Pakistan at the same time. Today, there is no doubt that China's ambiguous and partly costly experience of its engagement during the soviet encounter and the Taliban rule



is a crucial determinant of maintaining only a modest political role in Afghanistan. This is a determinant in Chinese foreign policy decision-making, which is not taken into consideration by many analysts.

Furthermore, the antagonists of Chinese Afghan policy tend to ignore that Beijing - as a global and regional power, especially as an immediate neighbour - has to take a much more complex security predicament and strategic scenario as well as political sensitivities into account than many other international actors involved in Afghanistan. In this context, one has to recognise that China basically shares the same goals as all other actors: a stable, secure and economically prosperous

Afghanistan. But it is obvious that different visions and strategies on how to rebuild a war-ravaged country exist and that Beijing and Washington are on two different poles of this continuum.

Based on its 'Five Principles

environment in order to establish friendly relations with its neighbours which is a sine qua none for successful cooperation. Therefore, Beijing's foreign policy establishment has to deal with a variety of multi-layered factors constraining and facilitating the country's political engagement in Afghanistan. In order to establish cordial and tranquil ties across the region and beyond, China has to take the interests of Iran and Russia into account, especially their sensitivities regarding foreign military presence in Afghanistan. In order to maintain the local diplomatic balance, the Chinese continue to respect the special relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Islamabad's influence on non-state actors. Beijing will not risk its 'all-weather-friendship' with Islamabad. China will not pressure Pakistan excessively in any area - especially not regarding forces fighting ISAF and the Afghan government. Above all, it will not align itself too closely with the NATO states. This passive stance limits China's options to take part in multi-lateral activities initiated by non-regional actors.

Having this in mind, one has to state that criticising China for being 'quiet' is beside the point. First, China was strictly against any coercive approach in Afghanistan quite from the beginning.

Second, one can't blame any government for not following the hubris of the Bush administration of ignoring the experience and advice of Russia, at least when it comes to assessing the likelihood of a military solution for

Afghanistan.

The current state of affairs in and beyond Kabul regarding major problems of western development projects as well as failed efforts of reconciliation progress is justification enough for identifying alternative approaches. The recent killing of 'former Taliban' Arsala Rahmani, a senior member of Afghanistan's high peace council once again underpins the difficulties and the need for a strategic change in the country's complex negotiation scenario.

Therefore, the governments of the ISAF states (especially the US) should start to take into consideration that a 'potential wish list' for Chinese contributions in Afghanistan should primarily be compiled by the Afghans themselves, as well as the international community.

It seems however, that Chinese strategic thinkers and leaders are starting to realise that due to the processes of globalisation and the subsequent interweaving involvement of their own economy, local, regional and international security are becoming increasingly becoming interrelated. In other words, economic engagement can't be separated from political, human and military aspects any more. A phenomenon which is reflected in China's rising security interests, not only in Afghanistan but also in the extended 'Af-Pak region'. The question which appears here is, if China is willing to develop the necessary flexibility in its foreign policy required to establish a more responsible and substantial role in the process of

rebuilding Afghanistan - especially with regards to security and the political sphere?

On the whole, one has to state that it remains quite difficult to evaluate future Chinese engagement in Afghanistan. In contrast to other regional and non-regional actors where most analysts are convinced that they are able to forecast the development of their activities, China's Afghan policy remains to be a conundrum. This is only partly owed to the political style and culture of Chinese 'silent' foreign policy or the general problem of collecting data of Chinese activities on the ground. What is predominantly catching the attention of observers is Beijing's attempt to set the parameters for a long-term engagement in Afghanistan. The fact that China has started to include local workforce in its Afghan economic development projects is a significant new trend. Additionally, besides energy security there are pressing issues like the prevention of drug trafficking and potential spillover effects of militant cross border activities calling for a larger and more active role in Afghanistan. Finally, from a historical as well as contemporary perspective, it seems that China is well placed and prepared to be a 'good neighbour' to every kind of future Afghan government, with or without the Taliban.

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