A REPORT OF THE CSIS
RUSSIA AND EURASIA PROGRAM

China and Afghanistan

CHINA'S INTERESTS, STANCES, AND PERSPECTIVES

Author
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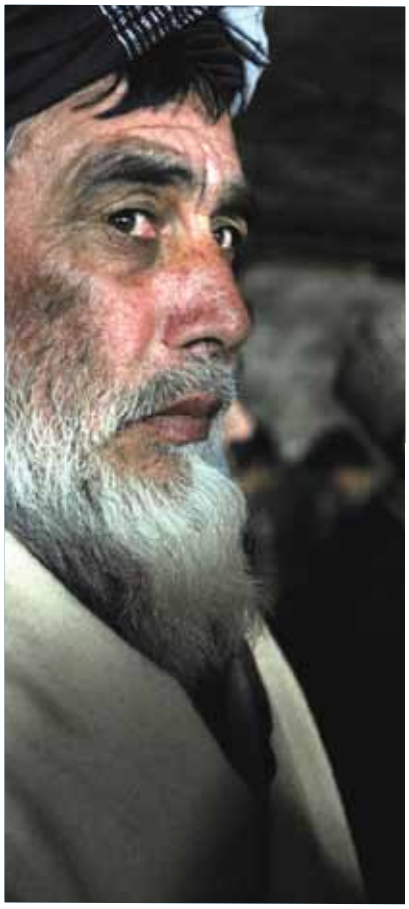
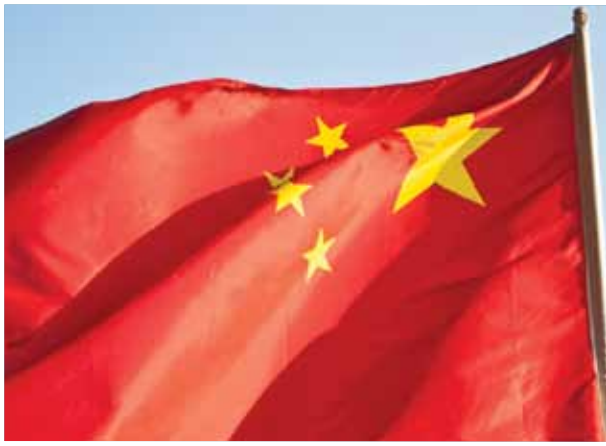
Foreword
Andrew C. Kuchins





March 2012

50 YEARS | CHARTING OUR FUTURE

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FOREWORD

With the imminent drawdown of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and the shift to full Afghan sovereignty by 2014, it seems axiomatic that U.S. influence and engagement will diminish in Afghanistan and its neighboring region in the years ahead. However, the political, economic, and security challenges of Afghan and regional stabilization will remain enormous long after 2014. How and to what extent other countries may be ready to assume a larger role in promoting Afghan stabilization are increasingly urgent questions for U.S. and international security policymakers. China's interests in Afghanistan are significant, and in this report Zhao Huasheng of Fudan University carefully lays out in a very nuanced and insightful manner Beijing's perspective on Afghanistan.

Because China is principally interested in preventing the destabilization of Xinjiang Province, it has broadly deferred to the United States and its Western allies who are leading military efforts, political reconciliation, and economic reconstruction in Afghanistan. As Zhao writes, China's interests in Afghanistan are more limited than those of the United States, and Beijing has no interest in playing a subordinate role "under the dominance of the West" either. Basically China wants the security threat contained, but is not prepared to contribute to the military effort, including opening a transit corridor on its territory. China is prepared to participate in Afghanistan's economic reconstruction, especially when it advances Chinese foreign economic interests. China is not as interested in Afghanistan's domestic economic and social order and would be open to, in fact expects and does not object to, Taliban involvement in Afghan politics as long as it happens *legally*.

Zhao's discussion of the interests of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Afghanistan is both historically comprehensive as well as provocative in its speculation about an expanded future role for the SCO. Virtually all key regional states with interests, albeit often competing, in Afghanistan are either members or observers in the SCO, an organization militarily uninvolved in Afghanistan. Zhao suggests, and is echoed by Russian scholar Alexander Lukin, that the SCO may thus be well-suited to conduct political reconciliation talks between different national and political groups within Afghanistan. But economic development, particularly the promoting of Afghanistan's regional economic connection with West, South, Central, and East Asia, is where Zhao sees the most significant role for the SCO. In conclusion, he rightly argues that if cooperation in the international community about Afghanistan's future breaks down and a new "great game" resumes, "the future of the Kabul process will be doomed," and chances of a new Afghan civil war with competing regional sponsors, as in the early 1990s, will be that much greater.

The CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program is especially pleased to release this timely report. The program's work on Afghanistan was launched more than three years ago with a path-breaking project examining the prospects for the then nascent Northern Distribution Network

(NDN).[1] Since then our attention has turned to lessons learned from the NDN and their relevance for thinking about a broader regional economic cooperation strategy.[2] This report builds on our work by looking more comprehensively at regional economic, political, and security interests, and forthcoming reports will examine Russian and Central Asian interests in Afghanistan.

I thank the Carnegie Corporation of New York for providing the generous support that enabled us to publish this report as well as to host Professor Zhao for four months in 2011 as a CSIS visiting scholar with the Russia and Eurasia Program.

Andrew C. Kuchins
Senior Fellow and Director
CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program
March 2012

1. Stephen Benson, *The MAGAI Construct and the Northern Distribution Network* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, November 2009), http://csis.org/files/publication/091110_Benson_MAGAI_Web.pdf; Andrew C. Kuchins, Thomas M. Sanderson, and David A. Gordon, *The Northern Distribution Network and the Modern Silk Road: Planning for Afghanistan's Future* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, December 2009), http://csis.org/files/publication/091217_Kuchins_NorthernDistNet_Web.pdf; and Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas M. Sanderson, *The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan: Geopolitical Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, January 2010), http://csis.org/files/publication/091229_Kuchins_NDNandAfghan_Web.pdf.

2. Andrew C. Kuchins and S. Frederick Starr, *The Key to Success in Afghanistan: A Modern Silk Road Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Central Asia–Caucasus Institute, May 2010), http://csis.org/files/publication/100610_key_to_success_in_afghanistan.pdf; and Andrew C. Kuchins, "A Truly Regional Economic Strategy for Afghanistan," *Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 77–91.

CHINA AND AFGHANISTAN
CHINA'S INTERESTS, STANCES, AND PERSPECTIVES

Zhao Huasheng

China holds clear, coherent, but relatively low-profile positions on Afghanistan. While staying largely with the mainstream of the international community on the issue of Afghanistan, China maintains an independent policy that reflects the peculiarities of Chinese interests, concerns, and priorities in Afghanistan. China has multiple interests in Afghanistan; however, domestic concerns about the security and stability of the largely Muslim region of Xinjiang overwhelm all others. China maintains normal and good relations with the Afghan government, takes active part in the country's economic rebuilding, and provides Afghanistan financial aid and other assistance. China supports the international community in its efforts in Afghanistan, but stays away from direct military involvement. China refrains from criticizing America's involvement in the war in Afghanistan, but it doubts the war's efficacy, and China refuses to join the American Northern Distribution Network (NDN) to Afghanistan. China dislikes the Taliban because of its close relations with the "East Turkistan" organization—a Uyghur separatist group—but China deals with the Taliban cautiously, trying to avoid direct conflict. China favors an Afghanistan governed by Afghans and hopes that the "Kabul process"—the transition to greater Afghan responsibility and ownership in both security and civilian areas—will have a successful end. At the same time, China also prepares for unexpected outcomes.

China Keeps Low-Key Positions on Afghanistan

China positions itself as an active player on Afghanistan. In a speech at a conference on Afghanistan, China's foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, said, in referring to the period after the formation of Hamid Karzai's provisional government in 2002, "In the after-war peace rebuilding of Afghanistan, China has been an active supporter, anticipator, and promoter."[1] However, among all the great powers, China is regarded as keeping the lowest profile on Afghanistan.[2] This position includes China's showing the least interest in challenging the political leadership of the United States and Europe in Afghanistan. It cautiously restricts itself from military involvement, not sending troops to join the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

1. "Yang Jiechi chuxi afuhan wenti diqu fenghui bing fabiao jianghua" 杨洁篪出席阿富汗问题地区峰会并发表讲话 [Yang Jiechi Took Part in the Conference on Afghanistan and Made Speech], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 26, 2010, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gj/yz/1206/xgxw/t653877.htm, http://english.cri.cn/6909/2010/01/27/1461s545669.htm.

2. Christian Le Mière, "Kabul's New Patron? The Growing Afghan-Chinese Relationship," *Foreign Affairs*, April 13, 2010, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66194/christian-le-miere/kabuls-new-patron.

A series of conditions influenced China's low-profile policy. With the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan, the United States and its European allies entered into Afghanistan in a massive way and took the role of political supervisor and military guarantor in Afghanistan. They enjoy the overall dominant influence in Afghan issues, ranging from regime formation and military buildup, to economic reconstruction. Actually, China currently has no big role to play, and has no interest in playing a subordinate partner under the dominance of the West.

Unlike the West, China has only limited goals in Afghanistan. While insisting on its political principles in reconstructing Afghanistan, China has no intention of rebuilding Afghanistan politically. The domestic affairs of Afghanistan, such as political structures, social patterns, and ideological orientations, are beyond what China sees as its tasks. Rather, China's aims in Afghanistan relate mainly to the issues that concern the security of the region in general, and in Xinjiang in particular.

Traditionally, Afghanistan was on the periphery of China's diplomacy, and China did not enjoy strong influence there. From the 1950s to the 1980s, Afghanistan had been in the Soviet sphere of influence. It was under Soviet occupation from 1979 until 1989, whereupon the Soviet Union withdrew its troops and civil war ensued. In 1996 the Taliban took national power, whose regime China did not recognize. Then the new war in Afghanistan, led by the United States with other ISAF support, broke out in 2001. The war has lasted for more than 10 years and continues today, though it is intended to wind down by the end of 2014. China has not been a protagonist in any of these significant events in Afghanistan, even though Afghanistan had been of constant concern to China.

However, the low-key stance of China does not mean low-level bilateral relations between China and the current Afghan government. China has maintained close and friendly relationship with Afghanistan since the Afghan government formed at the end of 2001. Since then, China and Afghanistan have maintained normal high-level official contacts. President Karzai paid his first visit to China in January 2002, almost immediately after the formation of Afghanistan's provisional government. The first state visit of President Karzai to China was made in 2006, followed by his second state visit to China in 2010. China's highest leaders, the president and premier, have not visited Afghanistan yet. Rather, official interaction is conducted mostly between secondary-level officials, particularly between the foreign ministries of the two sides. Along with the bilateral track, Chinese and Afghan leaders constantly use multilateral platforms for additional opportunities to meet each other, especially in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which Afghanistan's leaders regularly attend.

China's efforts focus on solidifying the political basis of the bilateral relationship, promoting economic cooperation, and providing financial and other assistance to Afghanistan. In 2006, China and Afghanistan signed the Treaty of Good Neighborly Friendship and Cooperation, an important document that laid out the basic political principles and the main directions of bilateral relations. Along with the treaty, the two states have reached a series of agreements related to cooperation in different areas. China-Afghanistan cooperation covers a wide range of areas, but security and the economy are top priorities. Both governments declared that they will cooperate in fighting terrorism, organized crime, and drug trafficking. The Chinese government expressed its support to the Afghan government's efforts to bring about stability, while Afghanistan's government committed to backing China's fight against terrorism, separatism, extremism, and transna-

tional crimes. The two governments agreed to strengthen economic relations, with emphasis on developing natural resources, generating electricity, constructing roads, improving agriculture, building transportation, and working on other infrastructure projects.[3]

Security Is the Core Concern of China

China's policy on Afghanistan is motivated to great extent by concern over the stability and security of Xinjiang, shaping the basic features of China's policy. China has economic and other important interests in Afghanistan, but these interests entail normal business and do not worry China.

While "East Turkistan" is the most dangerous threat to the stability and security of Xinjiang from inside, Afghanistan is regarded as the most serious threat from outside. The security interaction between Afghanistan and Xinjiang is obvious; as a neighbor of China, Afghanistan has strong influence on the security of Xinjiang. This connection is reflected in the close linkage of the "East Turkistan" organization with the Taliban and al Qaeda, whose solidarity goes back long before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. This linkage became even more strong and obvious during the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, when Afghanistan became the regional center of terrorism and extremism. Under the Taliban regime from 1996 to 2011, Afghanistan became a reliable base for the "East Turkistan" organization. The Taliban was the spiritual agitator and material supplier to "East Turkistan," training the fighters of "East Turkistan," supplying them with weapons, and sheltering those who fled China. No definite figures show how many "East Turkistan" members went through the training camps in Afghanistan, but they numbered more than a few.[4] In the war in Afghanistan against al Qaeda and the Taliban, the U.S. Army captured fighters from China's Xinjiang. Among the prisoners detained in the Guantanamo military base, 22 were Uyghurs. After the collapse of the Taliban regime, "East Turkistan" fighters retreated with al Qaeda and the Taliban, but they continue to fight side-by-side with al Qaeda and the Taliban both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. And there is little hope that al Qaeda and the Taliban will stop supporting "East Turkistan" groups; as long as al Qaeda and the Taliban operate in Afghanistan, their support to "East Turkistan" will probably continue.

The problem with "East Turkistan" terrorism and separatism in Xinjiang is that it will likely endure for a long time. While there is no possibility of "East Turkistan" separating Xinjiang from China, the Chinese government has little chance of rooting out the "East Turkistan" movement. The Chinese government possesses enough resources and capabilities to control the "East Turkistan" challenge, but eliminating the problem completely is difficult. So, China will have to face the problem indefinitely, with the security of Xinjiang remaining a core concern for years. The large riot in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, on July 5, 2009, was the latest major manifestation of the activity of "East Turkistan" in Xinjiang. This was the largest and most-violent riot in Xinjiang since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). According to the official reports,

3. These goals are formulated in the two China-Afghanistan Joint Communiqués, signed on June 20, 2006, and March 25, 2010.

4. According to official source of China, hundreds of East Turkistan separatists were trained in Taliban's Afghanistan. See "Fayan ren jiu meicheng zhongguo weiwu'er zuren zai afuhan canyu taliban de budui zuozhan da jizhe wen" 发言人就美称中国维吾尔族人在阿富汗参与塔利班的部队作战答记者问 [Spokesman Answers Reporter's Question on the Involvement of Chinese Uyghurs in Taliban Forces in Afghanistan], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, November 22, 2001, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gj/yz/1206/fyrygth/t10622.htm.

197 people were killed, most of them innocent residents of the city; also, more than 1,700 people were injured, and more than 1,600 cars and shops were burned or destroyed.[5] The event demonstrated how dangerous the problem with "East Turkistan" is. The lesson for China was huge: The riot removed any illusions that the problem with "East Turkistan" could be resolved easily and quickly, or that the problem may be fading with the economic development of China in general, and of Xinjiang in particular. A serious attack by a group of extremists on a police station in Hetian, a southern city of Xinjiang, which happened in July 2011, again demonstrated the seriousness of the problem. These events made China even more concerned about security in Xinjiang and, subsequently, putting security firmly as the top priority in the region.

From a wider perspective, Afghanistan does influence the overall environment of Xinjiang. Afghanistan is the critical outside factor to impact security in all the regions surrounding Xinjiang, from South to Central Asia. Instability in Afghanistan inevitably will spill over to those regions. Without resolving the problem with Afghanistan, China cannot guarantee the security of the surrounding regions, including Xinjiang itself. In regions like Central Asia, Pakistan, and Kashmir, any instability will lead to a rise of extremist Islamic forces, in turn encouraging the "East Turkistan" organization. With this recognition, China views Afghanistan as an inseparable part of building Xinjiang's security.

Afghanistan also poses security concerns for China from the geopolitical point of view. For more than 10 years Afghanistan has been an arena of war, with more than 100,000 troops of different countries still fighting there. Military bases were built in Afghanistan and Central Asian countries. Under-the-surface competition of great powers in the region has intensified, making the region more unfavorable as a part of China's surrounding environment, in terms of both politics and security.

China suffers from the Afghan drug problem, as well. Due to the geographic proximity of the two countries, it is easy to traffic drugs from Afghanistan to China through Central Asia and Pakistan. Now, Afghanistan has become one of the largest sources of narcotics trafficking to China, after Southeast Asia. The first victim of Afghan narcotics is Xinjiang, where trafficking from Afghanistan has been worsening in recent years. According to the Xinjiang police, in 2010 they detected 15 cases related to drug trafficking from Afghanistan.[6]

China Joins in the Postwar Rebuilding of Afghanistan

China supports the international efforts to help Afghanistan overcome its challenges. As a neighbor of Afghanistan, China had been one part of the "6 plus 2" format.[7] This format was created in 1999 under the UN framework with the aim of promoting political reconciliation and peace in

5. Among the 197 deaths, 156 were innocent residents, broken down ethnically as 134 Han, 11 Hui, 10 Uyghur, and 1 Manchu. "Urumqi shijian zhi 156 min wuguzhe siwang" 乌鲁木齐事件致156名无辜者死亡 [Urumqi Event Killed 156 Innocent People], News.China.com.cn, August 6, 2009, http://www.china.com.cn/v/news/china/2009-08/06/content_18284220.htm.

6. "Xinjiang qunian pohuo dupin anjian 1664 qi" 新疆去年破获毒品案件1664起 [1,664 Drug-Related Cases Cracked Last Year in Xinjiang], Ifeng.com, March 15, 2011, http://finance.ifeng.com/roll/20110315/3671334.shtml.

7. The "6 plus 2" format includes the six neighbors of Afghanistan—namely, Pakistan, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran, plus Russia and the United States.

Afghanistan. The format became inactive after U.S military forces went into Afghanistan in 2001. After the Taliban fell, China became an active participant of international activities to rebuild Afghanistan. It has taken part in almost all important international political activities on Afghanistan, such as the international conference on Afghanistan in London in 2006, the conference in Paris in 2008, the conference in The Hague in 2009, and the conferences in London, Istanbul, and Kabul in 2010.

China supports the engagement of the international community in addressing problems related to Afghanistan, realizing that without international help Afghanistan cannot solve its problems by itself. China's positions on this supportive activity are summarized by five principles: Guarantee Afghanistan as an independent and sovereign state, finally governed by Afghans; reach peace through political reconciliation; promote a progressive society; have an Afghanistan friendly to its neighbors; and conduct international cooperation, with the United Nations holding a dominant role. China adopted a four-point approach: First, safeguard security and stability; second, develop the economy; third, improve governance, respecting the right of Afghans to choose the model of government suited to the realities of Afghanistan; and fourth, enhance international cooperation.[8] In the latest version of this four-point approach, China replaced the words "improve governance" with "political reconciliation."[9]

With the beginning of the "Kabul process" and withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan, China sees the international society's duty in what it calls the "five supports": First, support an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" process of peace and reconstruction. Second, support Afghanistan's capacity building, so that it can take over the responsibility of safeguarding national peace and stability as early as possible. Third, support Afghanistan in advancing national reconciliation through its own efforts. Fourth, support Afghanistan in developing the economy during the transition period and beyond 2014. And fifth, support Afghanistan in developing external relations on the basis of mutual respect, equality, and mutual benefit, especially enhancing good-neighborly relations and mutual political trust with other countries in the region.[10]

China joined the rebuilding of Afghanistan immediately after the new Afghan government was formed. Meeting with the president of the Provisional Government, Hamid Karzai, in January 2002, China's president, Jiang Zemin, committed China to taking an active part in rebuilding Afghanistan, and promised to provide $150 million for this purpose.[11] According to an official

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8. "Yang Jiechi chanshu zhongguo zai afuhan wenti shang 4 dian zhuzhang" 杨洁篪阐述中国在阿富汗问题4点主张 [China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi Set Forth Four Points on Rebuilding of Afghanistan in London], *News.Sina.com,* January 28, 2010, http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2010-01-29/045419570766.shtml.

9. "Yang Jiechi waizhang zai afuhan wenti kābùěr guójì huìyì shàng de fǎ yán (quánwén)" 杨洁篪外长在阿富汗问题喀布尔国际会议上的发言（全文 [Speech of China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi in the International Conference on Afghanistan in Kabul], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 20, 2007, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/ziliao/zyjh/t718476.htm, http://www.bjreview.com.cn/document/txt/2010-09/01/content_295504.htm.

10. "Yang Jiechi waizhang zai afuhan wenti boen huiyi shang de jianghua" 杨洁篪外长在阿富汗问题波恩会议上的讲话 [Remarks by H. E. Yang Jiechi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China at the International Afghanistan Conference, Bonn], December 5, 2011, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/ziliao/zt/dnzt/yjcwzbfhwtdwzh/t884414.htm, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t884443.htm.

11. "Jiang Zemin zhuxi huijian afuhan linshi zhengfu zhuxi ka'er zha yi" 江泽民主席会见阿富汗临时政府主席卡尔扎伊 [President Jiang Zemin Meets with the Afghan Provisional Government President Karzai], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 24, 2002, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gj/yz/1206/xgxw/t5469.htm.

source, from 2002 to 2010 China's aid to Afghanistan totaled ¥1.3 billion (about $205.3 million). At the same time, China has remitted $19.5 million of debt.[12] In 2011, China decided to provide Afghanistan an additional ¥150 million ($23.7 million) of free assistance.[13] The other ways China has helped Afghanistan include construction of infrastructural projects, such as the State Hospital in Kabul and Parvan irrigation project; human resources training, whereby more than 800 Afghan officials and technical staff have been trained in China; and export tariff privileges, for example, in 2010 China decided to gradually exempt taxes on 95 percent of the commodities imported from Afghanistan.

Chinese companies actively participate in the economic rebuilding of Afghanistan, as well. Among all the projects that Chinese companies won, development of the Aynak copper mine is the biggest, which also ranks as the biggest foreign-investment project in Afghanistan. China's Metallurgical Group plans to invest about $4 billion in Afghanistan over five years; beyond the contract, the company has promised to build railways, exploit coal mines, and construct a 400-megawatt coal-fired power plant and a 1 million-ton steel works. China's total investment reaches $10 billion. Afghanistan's government can earn $808 million by granting exploit rights, and about $60 million per year from taxes over 30 years.[14] Another huge project that China won in Afghanistan entails exploiting oil and national-gas reserves in Afghanistan's northeastern provinces of Sari Pul and Faryab. This is the first contract where the Afghan government has allowed foreign companies to exploit its oil and gas resources. Under the deal, signed in December 2011, the Afghan government will receive 70 percent from sale profits. The China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) will also pay 15 percent in royalties, as well as corporate taxes and rent for land used for its operations. In addition, the CNPC promised to build a refinery within three years, the first in Afghanistan. The deal is estimated to earn Afghanistan as much as $7 billion over 25 years.[15] If the project succeeds, Afghanistan will end its history of total dependence on imported oil and gas.

The trade between China and Afghanistan keeps growing. To stimulate Afghanistan's export to China, the Chinese government offered Afghanistan tariff-free treatment of 278 commodities, starting in 2006. The major commodities China exports to Afghanistan are machinery, electronic equipment, building materials, light industrial goods, domestic appliances, and green tea; China imports from Afghanistan sheep leather, carpets, cotton, and other items. The trade turnover between China and Afghanistan has been relatively modest, as shown in table 1.

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12. "Zhongguo zhencheng wusi yuanzhu afuhan jiaoguan liang guo youyi zhi hua" 中国真诚无私援助阿富汗浇灌两国友谊之花 [China Provides Sincere and Selfless Assistance to Afghanistan Watering the Flower of Friendship between the Two Countries], Xinhua News Agency, August 22, 2010, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2010-08/22/c_12471641.htm.

13. "Yang Jiechi waizhang zai afuhan wenti boen huiyi shang de jianghua" 杨洁篪外长在阿富汗问题波恩会议上的讲话 [Remarks by H. E. Yang Jiechi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China at the International Afghanistan Conference, Bonn], December 5, 2011, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/ziliao/zt/dnzt/yjcwzbfhwtdwzh/t884414.htm, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t884443.htm.

14. "Lizu changyuan de shuangying—ji zhong ye shougou afuhan ai na ke tong kuang" 立足长远的双赢—记中冶收购阿富汗艾娜克铜矿 [MCC's Acquisition of Afghanistan's Aynak Copper Mine—A Long-Term Win-Win Project], Xinhua News Agency, June 4, 2008, http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2008-06/04/content_8311160.htm.

15. "China, Afghanistan Sign First Oil Contract," China Network Television (CNTV), December 29, 2011, http://english.cntv.cn/program/newsupdate/20111229/107468.shtml.

Table 1. China-Afghanistan Trade Volume ($ millions)

Year	Total	China's Exports	China's Imports
2002	19.99	19.91	0.08
2003	27.06	26.45	0.61
2004	57.92	56.97	0.95
2005	52.77	51.21	1.56
2006	100.66	100.47	0.19
2007	171.00	169.00	2.00
2008	—	—	—
2009	367.99	360.00	7.99
2010	715.70	704.00	11.70

Source: "Zhongguo tong afuhan shuangbian guanxi" 中国同阿富汗双边关系 [Sino-Afghanistan Bilateral Relations], January 2009, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gj/yz/1206/sbgx/. The figures for 2009 and 2010 were based on the statistics of Afghan government sources for the periods March 21, 2009, to March 20, 2010, and March 21, 2010, to March 20, 2011, http://af.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/zxhz/tjsj/201110/20111007773306.html.

With the world financial crisis, bilateral trade dropped in 2008, but resumed its growth in 2009 and has speeded up since then. China was the second-largest import partner and fifth-largest export market for Afghanistan.[16]

China Refuses Military Involvement and Takes a Cautious Approach to the Taliban

China backs the antiterrorist activities of international forces and Afghanistan's government, and provides training for the officers and policemen of Afghanistan's government.[17] However, China refrains from direct military involvement. Responding to the speech of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown about the possibility of Chinese military forces joining the ISAF, China explicitly refused; indeed, China rejects any possibility of sending its troops to Afghanistan.[18]

16. "Zhongguo jinkou afuhan chanpin qingkuang" 中国进口阿富汗产品情况 [China's Import from Afghanistan], November 28, 2011, http://af.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/ddfg/waimao/201111/20111107850245.html.

17. "A wenti guoji huiyi zhaokai lizhaoxing chuxi bing zuo si dian chengno" 阿问题国际会议召开 李肇星出席并作四点承诺 [Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing Gave Four Promises in the International Conference on Afghanistan], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, February 1, 2006, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gj/yz/1206/xgxw/t233449.htm.

18. "Waijiao bu fayan ren qingang jiu suowei zhongguo paibing canjiia zhu afuhan guoji lianjun wenti da jizhe wen" 外交部发言人秦刚就所谓中国派兵参加驻阿富汗国际联军问题答记者问 [Foreign Ministry Spokesman Answers the Questions about Sending Chinese Military Forces to Join ISAF in Afghanistan],

China did not join the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) to Afghanistan either. In 2009, the United States opened the NDN with the aim of meeting the growing demand for supplies for the ISAF's larger armies in Afghanistan. Before opening the NDN, the United States relied mainly on the line through Pakistan, which is convenient but unsafe, facing the constant threat of attacks from the Taliban. The NDN starts from the Baltic and Black Sea ports, passes through Russia and Central Asian countries, and enters into Afghanistan mainly from Uzbekistan and partly from Tajikistan. The NDN has three branches, known as NDN North, NDN South, and Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan (KKT). Its function is to transport nonlethal goods to the American troops and ISAF in Afghanistan.[19] Russia and the Central Asian states cooperate with the United States on the project to different degrees.

Although China is not a part of the NDN that functions today, due to its geographical location China could be included in the project in a wider understanding of it. Speculation is that the United States likely tried to convince China to open the Wahan Corridor, and authorize the transport of U.S. supplies through the corridor to Afghanistan. But the Wahan Corridor, which connects China's Xinjiang region to Afghanistan, is inaccessible most of the year because of its tough mountainous conditions and long, snow-covering winters; also, no roads run through the Afghan side, bearing on access by trucks. So, opening of the corridor has more symbolic meaning than practical use. China's refusal conveys the message that it has no intention to join the NDN or other projects like it. This could be interpreted in either of two ways: China trying to keep a certain distance from the American campaigns in Afghanistan; or China being unhappy to see a U.S. footprint in Xinjiang, a sensitive region of China. Notably, however, China has been more willing recently to work with the United States in Central Asian affairs. The first round of dialogue on Central Asia between China and the United States, held in Beijing in March 2011, demonstrated the inclination of the two countries to consult over the issues of the region.[20]

China has no sympathy for the Taliban. Accordingly, China voted for UN Security Council Resolution 1373, adopted right after the September 11 terrorist attacks and that provided legitimacy for the United States to launch the war in Afghanistan. China officially expressed its support for the military operation against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and cooperated with the international community in the process.[21]

However, China is characteristically cautious toward the Taliban—that is, instead of harshly condemning the Taliban by name, China prefers a low-key approach. China's caution is based partly on its traditional modest diplomatic culture, and partly on opting to refrain from involvement in the domestic politics of other states, including Afghanistan. China perceives the Taliban as

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, November 17, 2008, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gj/yz/1206/fyrygth/t522460.htm.

19. Andrew C. Kuchins, Thomas M. Sanderson, and David A. Gordon, "Afghanistan: Building the Missing Link in the Modern Silk Road," *Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (April 2010): 37, http://www.twq.com/10april/docs/10apr_KuchinsSandersonGordon.pdf.

20. The dialogue was one round under the larger framework of the China-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue. The Chinese assistant foreign minister, Cheng Guoping, and the U.S. assistant secretary for South and Central Asian affairs, R. Blake, attended the dialogue. Both sides exchanged opinions on the issues of Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and Afghanistan.

21. "Waijiao bu fayan ren jiu meiguo dui afuhan de junshi daji da jizha wen" 外交部发言人就美国对阿富汗的军事打击答记者问 [Foreign Ministry Spokesman Answers the Questions of the Correspondents on the U.S. Military Campaign in Afghanistan], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, October 8, 2001, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gj/yz/1206/fyrygth/t10604.htm.

more than a religious extremist group, but also as a real political force that could have a long-term presence in the Afghan political arena. China is unconvinced that the Taliban can be destroyed by military means. Indeed, the passage of time has justified China's assessment of the Taliban's resilience. It now appears that the Taliban cannot be eliminated by military means, and that negotiations with the Taliban, as proposed by the United States, confirms recognition of the Taliban as a real political force. Based on its judgment of the Taliban, China prefers a policy with long-term perspectives, reducing as much as possible harm from the Taliban. China takes this stance despite its suffering from the Taliban's support of "East Turkistan," and its being a victim of the Taliban's terrorist activities, as China has openly admitted.[22] Nevertheless, China wants to avoid provoking direct conflict with the Taliban, believing it could bring more harm to China.

Among all the countries neighboring Afghanistan, China traditionally has the fewest links with Afghanistan's domestic affairs and society. Although China shares a border with Afghanistan, the border is short, stretching less than 100 kilometers, and is difficult to cross due to its tough geography. China has no Chinese ethnic minority in Afghanistan, as the other neighbors of Afghanistan do. And China has never been involved in Afghan domestic wars and political processes. So, Afghanistan has no bad memories about China, that is, no political or social group in Afghanistan views China as an antagonist—circumstances that China wishes to preserve.

At the same time, China is well aware of its vulnerability from its unchangeable geographic proximity to Afghanistan. That China cannot leave the region, like the nonregional countries, if the situation were to get out of control, is another reason it pursues caution in relations with the Taliban. Hence, from the beginning of ISAP's intervention in Afghanistan following the September 11, 2001, attacks, China has insisted that any arrangements should take into account their long-term effects on the region.[23] In other words: do not create a mess and then leave.

China Supports the SCO's Activities in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is not a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), or an observer country. However, Afghanistan has special relations with the SCO. There are some significant coincidences between the development of the SCO and the situation in Afghanistan. In 1996, the Taliban snatched the state power of Afghanistan, and in that year the "Shanghai Five" was created. Before 1997, the Shanghai Five, the SCO's predecessor, covered border security, to the exclusion of other issues. It was not until 1998 that the Shanghai Five began to focus on regional security and economic cooperation, signaling the real debut of the Shanghai Five in broad regional matters. Then in 2001, the SCO was established, the same year the September 11 attacks occurred. But the coincidences were not by accident, as both the Shanghai Five and the SCO came into being

22. "Fayan ren kongquan jiu 'jidujiao kexue zhenyan bao' youguan zhongguo zhichi ben·ladeng 'jidi' zuzhi de baodao da jizhe wen" 发言人孔泉就《基督教科学箴言报》有关中国支持本·拉登"基地"组织的报道答记者问 [Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Answers the Correspondents on the Questions about China's Support of bin Laden and al Qaeda, Reported by Christian Science], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, August 15, 2002, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gj/yz/1206/fyrygth/t7695.htm.

23. China's foreign minister at that time, Tang Jiaxuan, put forward five principles for handling the challenges in Afghanistan in the "6 plus 2" meeting under the auspices of the United Nations. See "Zhongguo tichu jiejue afuhan wenti wu xiang yuanze" 中国提出解决阿富汗问题五项原则 [China Proposed Five Principles to Resolve the Afghan Problem], Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in New York, November 14, 2011, http://www.nyconsulate.prchina.org/chn/xw/t29990.htm.

against the significant historical backdrop of Afghanistan. Indeed, Russian president Vladimir Putin once pointed out that the Afghan situation was one factor leading to the establishment of the SCO. Throughout the history of the SCO, the Afghan issue has persisted, the main reason being that Afghanistan has always been closely related to the security of the region as a whole. Without resolution of the Afghan issue, which remains a shadow over the region, the security and stability of Central Asia can hardly be achieved.

Of course, the SCO was not established solely because of Afghanistan; many other vital factors led to creating the organization. Nevertheless, the relationship between the SCO and the Afghan situation is obvious, greatly influencing the SCO's agenda. Although the SCO does have a set of consistent principles on the Afghan situation, its concrete policies have evolved over time.

Prior to the September 11, 2001, attacks, it was the Taliban that ruled Afghanistan, practicing religious extremism and supporting international terrorist organizations. All SCO member countries near Afghanistan suffered from the spillover of terrorism from Afghanistan. In this period, the SCO was extremely worried about the Afghan situation, a deep concern unambiguously revealed by key communiqués and statements. In July 1998, the foreign ministers of the Shanghai Five member countries expressed their anxiety on the tense situation in Afghanistan; in August 1999, the heads of five states—China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—expressed their "deep worries" in a joint statement; and in March 2000, the defense ministers of the five countries expressed "grave concern." Clearly, the Shanghai Five countries were acutely troubled by the situation in Afghanistan.

However, the SCO was neither qualified for, nor capable of, solving the Afghan issue on its own. Hence, joint defense was its only security option. As for the SCO's policy on the internal disputes of Afghanistan, the organization chose not to intervene, and not to support or oppose any side. Believing that internal reconciliation was the path to resolving the Afghan issue, the SCO encouraged the various groups to conduct political negotiations and take account of the interests of the groups with power so as to realize national peace. The SCO opposed resorting to military means to reach a settlement, maintaining that solving the differences militarily would be impossible. At the time, the Taliban was in power, possessing the strongest military, while the political parties representing the interests of Uzbeks, Tajiks, and other ethnic groups in Afghanistan were politically expelled and militarily overwhelmed. Therefore, the Shanghai Five's position was more favorable toward the latter.

While endorsing the participation of the international community in settling the Afghan issue, the SCO emphasized the central position of the United Nations, which, it believed, should play the leading and organizing role in this effort. The SCO supported the "6 plus 2" model, with "6" referring to the six neighbors of Afghanistan—China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Pakistan—and "2" referring to Russia and the United States. That said, the SCO has stated explicitly that it "opposes any external forces using Afghanistan and its territory to commit activities that would jeopardize the regional security." However, the SCO did not give detailed answers to questions such as whether the term "external forces" refers to specific countries or organizations, including international terrorist forces like al Qaeda, and what activities the SCO understands to be detrimental to regional security.

The 9/11 attacks marked the beginning of another stage of the SCO's Afghanistan policy. With fundamental changes taking place in Afghanistan after 9/11, the SCO also faced a completely new

scenario. In this period, the SCO had three policy matters to resolve: its stance on the war in Afghanistan, its relationship with the new government of Afghanistan, and the principles guiding the Afghan reconstruction. Accordingly, on January 7, 2002, the foreign ministers of the SCO released a joint communiqué with a relatively comprehensive statement of the SCO's policies on Afghanistan. Among the key points of the policy statement were to identify the Taliban as an organization supporting terrorism and agree to the overthrow of the Taliban government, as well as to support the Afghan Interim Government and prepare to carry out dialogue for cooperation with the Afghan authorities. In addition, the SCO statement maintained that Afghanistan should be a neutral state, outside of any sphere of influence; the Afghan people should choose a political system and development model on their own instead of accepting one imposed on them from the outside; the international security-assistance troops should act under the mandate of the United Nations and with the consent of the legitimate authorities of Afghanistan; humanitarian assistance should be rendered for Afghanistan; and the United Nations should play a leading role in the international cooperation for rebuilding Afghanistan.

After U.S. and ISAF forces toppled the Taliban government, all countries were optimistic about the future of Afghanistan, as the common belief was that the conditions in Afghanistan had been solved. However, the situation developed beyond what had been expected, as stability was not attained, economic development was sluggish, and the rebuilding was fraught with difficulties. In light of these circumstances, at the UN General Assembly meeting on Afghanistan held in November 2005, the SCO laid out its views, focusing on the following key points: promote political stability and economic development as well as national reconciliation in Afghanistan, and build "a stable Afghanistan that is free of terrorism, war, narcotics and poverty"; encourage Afghanistan to build a friendly and cooperative surrounding environment by committing to good relations with its neighbors; and maintain that assistance from the international community should be led by the United Nations, with the international community respecting the state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unity of Afghanistan. The international community should not interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, and the international alliance against terrorism "should act under the mandate of the UN Security Council and with the consent of the legitimate authorities of Afghanistan."[24] The SCO's Afghanistan policy had changed somewhat, with more attention paid to Afghanistan's internal political and economic issues and national reconciliation. Not mentioning state neutrality any more, the SCO proposed that Afghanistan should establish good relations with its neighbors. At the same time, the SCO adhered to the principles of Afghanistan's state sovereignty and UN leadership.

In this period, the SCO established direct contact with Afghanistan. As a token of the SCO's enhanced cooperation with Afghanistan, it invited Hamid Karzai, head of the Afghan Interim Government, to attend the SCO Summit as a guest in June 2004, which reached the decision to establish the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group. Since 2006, the Afghan president has attended the SCO Summit every year. In November 2005, the Protocol on Establishment of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was officially signed. Not staffed with any full-time personnel, the

24. "Zhang Yishan dashi daibiao shanghai hezuo zuzhi zai di 60 jie lianda shenyi afuhan wenti shi de fayan"张义山大使代表上海合作组织在地60届联大审议阿富汗问题时的发言 [Speech of Ambassador Zhang Yishan on Behalf of Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the 60th Session of the UN on the Discussion of Afghanistan Problem], November 29, 2005, http://www.china-un.org/chn/ldhy/yw/ld60/t223885.htm.

liaison group consists of the SCO secretariat and representatives of its member countries and Afghanistan; the latter position was to be filled by an official of the Afghan Embassy in Beijing. The major function of the group is to propose cooperation on issues of common interest. This liaison mechanism provides a channel for consultations at regular intervals or whenever necessary. This reflects the special importance of Afghanistan to the SCO, as it is the only country that enjoys a liaison mechanism with the organization.

Starting in 2008, the SCO member countries and their academic circles, especially Russia and the Central Asian countries, have echoed the appeal for the SCO to play a greater role in Afghan matters, the latter assuming more weight on the SCO agenda as a consequence. At the SCO Summit held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in August 2008, the heads of states decided to enhance the activities of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group and begin preparations to convene a special conference on Afghanistan under the auspices of the SCO. They also proposed that the United Nations mandate for the ISAF include combating narcotics production and trafficking in Afghanistan. In October 2008, the SCO member countries and Afghan representatives met in Beijing.

In 2009, the SCO became even more active in issues related to Afghanistan. For example, in January of that year, the SCO member countries held a vice-ministerial consultation conference on Afghanistan. In March, the SCO convened the special conference on Afghanistan in Moscow. The conference issued a declaration at the conclusion. The declaration underscored the importance of sustained international efforts to achieve a stable, peaceful, prosperous, and democratic Afghanistan and stressed the leadership of Afghanistan and the central role of the UN in the process. It emphasized the need for sustained international support to strengthen Afghan security institutions to effectively combat terrorism and narcotics. It acknowledged the important role of the ISAF and coalition forces for security to Afghanistan. The declaration supported transregional projects, in particular construction of a united infrastructure network and energy corridor, transportation, and transit. The declaration also noted that the SCO was the most appropriate for a wide dialogue, with the participation of partners, on Afghanistan-related issues in the context of joint efforts by the international community and Afghanistan and for practical interaction between Afghanistan and its neighboring states in combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime.[25] This conference was the most broadly represented in the history of the SCO. Apart from delegates of the SCO member states and observer countries, the meeting also included attendance by delegates from Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, Japan; UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon; and delegates of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the European Union, NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Also in March, the SCO and Afghan government declared a common plan of action for combating terrorism, illicit drug trafficking, and organized crime, laying out the common approaches, areas, cases, and forms of cooperation of the two sides.[26]

In light of the preceding discussion, the SCO clearly attaches great significance to the circumstances in Afghanistan. Against the backdrop of the kickoff of the "Kabul process" and pullout of foreign military forces, the future development of Afghanistan is full of uncertainties. Confronted

25. "Declaration of the Special Conference on Afghanistan Convened under the Auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," March 27, 2009, http://www.sectsco.org/EN/show.asp?id=98.

26. Part of the content of this plan first appeared in *International Studies* (Beijing), September/October 2009.

with this challenge, the SCO is prepared to play a larger, more active role there. As Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi put it, "The role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other existing international organizations and cooperation mechanisms should be brought into full play."[27]

With regard to the future of Afghanistan after the planned withdrawal of U.S. and ISAF forces by the end of 2014, the SCO's position is to see Afghanistan "become an independent, neutral, peaceful, and prosperous country."[28] At the same time, the SCO fully recognizes the seriousness of Afghan security, acknowledging that the country "remains one of the key sources of threats to the regional security and stability." But convinced that the Afghan conflict cannot be resolved solely through military means, the SCO wishes to focus on the socioeconomic issues in Afghanistan, including the reconstruction of communications and public infrastructure.[29]

The SCO has advantages addressing Afghan issues, the greatest advantages being the organization's geographical proximity to Afghanistan, as well as the close relations of its members and observers with Afghanistan. The SCO possesses great potential in dealing with Afghanistan problems, as it comprises five of the six neighbor states of Afghanistan, as well as Russia, Kazakhstan, and India, three countries with considerable influence in Afghanistan. Today, all member countries play an important role in matters related to Afghanistan.

While the SCO excludes the possibility of sending troops to Afghanistan, it could play a significant role in political developments. Some scholars believe that the SCO is the most suitable platform for political negotiations on Afghanistan, advocating that the SCO take a lead role. Alexander Lukin, the director of the Center for East Asian and SCO Studies at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, argues, "The SCO has every opportunity of launching a peaceful intra-Afghan dialogue." According to Lukin, the SCO is particularly valuable because some of its member states and observer countries—specifically Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Pakistan, and India—carry a great deal of weight with individual Afghan ethnic groups. They could motivate those groups inside Afghanistan to join talks on resolving internal conflict.[30] In addition, the SCO has other favorable conditions allowing it to play this role: It was not involved in the Afghanistan war militarily, and it has no intention to impose its own political and ideological models on Afghanistan. So, the different political groups in Afghanistan may more easily accept the SCO.

But the economy is where the SCO could contribute most. For Afghanistan, involvement in regional economic cooperation is the natural way to develop its economy, with the SCO as one of the most suitable frameworks for Afghanistan to join. Many ways are possible for the SCO and Afghanistan to cooperate, such as in trade, transportation, energy, agriculture, and investment. As neighboring countries, SCO states are the most convenient trading partners for Afghanistan. Currently, Pakistan, India, and Iran are the top three-largest importers for Afghanistan; and Uzbeki-

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27. "Yang Jiechi waizhang zai afuhan wenti boen huiyi shang de jianghua" 杨洁篪外长在阿富汗问题波恩会议上的讲话 [Remarks by H. E. Yang Jiechi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China at the International Afghanistan Conference, Bonn], December 5, 2011, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/ziliao/zt/dnzt/yjcwzbfhwtdwzh/t884414.htm, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t884443.htm.

28. "Astana [Kazakhstan] Declaration of the 10th Anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," June 15, 2011, http://www.sco2011.kz/en/kzsco/inform.php.

29. "Joint Communiqué of Meeting of the Council of the Heads of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the SCO," June 15, 2011, http://www.sco2011.kz/en/kzsco/astana.php.

30. Alexander Lukin, "SCO and NATO: Is Dialogue Possible?" Valdai International Discussion Club, July 21, 2011, http://valdaiclub.com/asia/28720.html.

stan, China, and Pakistan are the top three exporters. All of them are SCO countries.[31] Afghanistan is an inland country, where transportation is critical for its economic development; located at the intersection of the West, South, and Central Asia, Afghanistan has a vital role in regional transportation. With the participation of Afghanistan, a new transportation network linking all of these regions will be possible, benefiting SCO states and Afghanistan alike. Similarly, with Afghanistan suffering from a lack of energy, the best solution lies in cooperation with the surrounding states—at present importing electricity, oil, and gas from Central Asian states and Russia. Also, the SCO states possess the ability to invest in Afghanistan: China is the biggest foreign investor in Afghanistan, with Russia and Kazakhstan offering considerable investment possibilities. Although Russia built 142 projects in Afghanistan during the Soviet era, the projects need modernizing, which Russia is best positioned to do.

In June 2011, Afghanistan applied to the SCO for observer status.[32] The application could be interpreted as the Afghan government wanting even closer ties with the SCO in the context of the ongoing situation in Afghanistan. If the SCO accepts the application, Afghanistan will enroll into the SCO institutionally, with that country's situation becoming an internal instead of external consideration for the SCO. The influence of the SCO in Afghanistan will then increase, as will its responsibility.

China Relies on the Success of the "Kabul Process"

Afghanistan's government is going to take over all of the country's administrative and security responsibilities by the end of 2014. Named the "Kabul process," this assumption of responsibility started in July 2010. Politically and practically, the Kabul process is the right way for Afghanistan to go; however, the details matter, and the "right" direction may not necessarily lead to the expected end. The outcome of the process depends on whether the tactics and conditions are right, as well. Due to the difficult problems Afghanistan faces, the Kabul process will likely be complicated and full of risks, with an uncertain future. Different scenarios are possible.

One scenario is that Afghanistan's government succeeds in maintaining power and keeping relative stability in the country, which is supported by a number of factors. The current situation is often compared to that of 1989, when Soviet troops left Afghanistan after 10 years of unsuccessful war. Afghanistan's Najibula government, supported by the Soviet Union, was overthrown by opposition forces in three years. This history is frequently recalled, with hints that the United States could see the same fate. Also, a widely held opinion is that all the empires that invaded Afghanistan failed, the latest examples being Great Britain in the nineteenth century and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century—making Afghanistan the "graveyard" of great powers. This image casts a pessimistic shadow over the drawdown of American and other international forces from Afghanistan.

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31. "Afuhan duihua maoyi dafu zengzhan" 阿富汗对华贸易大幅增长, 中国驻阿富汗大使馆经商处,2011.10.11 [Afghanistan-China Trade Increased Substantially], The Economic and Commercial Counselor's Office of the Embassy of PRC in Afghanistan, October 11, 2011, http://af.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/zxhz/tjsj/201110/20111007773306.html.

32. "Intervuyou spetspretsdavitelia prezidenta rosiiskoi federatsii po delam shos K.M.Barskogo agentstvu Interfax" [Interviw to Interfax by K. M. Barskii, Special Representative of the President of Russian Federation on SCO Issues], March 11, 2011, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/AC5EC2628F593B704425793D0039DD5F.

However, the situation in Afghanistan today is quite different from that of the 1980s, not to say the nineteenth century.[33] The most significant difference is that now all the great powers in the world support the Afghan government and no single country stands by the Taliban. In addition, in spite of their shortcomings, the secular political institutions are preferred, by a significant part of the population, compared with an extreme religious regime. Further, the pullout of foreign troops will have a positive impact, removing a major irritating factor used by the Taliban for its benefit. Finally, the Afghan government has much stronger military forces than does the Taliban. By the end of 2011, the Afghan National Army (ANA) increased to 171,600 personnel and the Afghan National Police (ANP) to 134,000.[34] Such a huge force should be able to control the situation if it can operate effectively, applying good training, tactics, and morale. More than that, with ISAF forces withdrawn, the ANA and ANP will not just be providing assistance to others but will be fighting for their very survival.

The success of this scenario depends, though, on many "ifs," including a capable government, successful national reconciliation, necessary international aid, international solidarity, and improvement of the economy. All of these conditions are vital, as the failure of any of them could lead to failure of the Kabul process.

The first of these conditions, a capable government, is crucial, and Afghanistan's government is the basis for the success of the Kabul process. Two questions are germane to this point: First, can the current Afghan government prove itself capable? Unfortunately, there is strong doubt about this; the government of Afghanistan failed to prove its capabilities in the past 10 years, so people wonder whether it can make the necessary fundamental changes in next few years. Furthermore, is the current political model suitable for Afghanistan? Afghanistan is a state with a tribal social structure, deeply influenced by religious forces, with most of its population illiterate and living in poverty. While the West believes in the universal applicability of democratic institutions, the local states emphasize the importance of local tradition, arguing that any political model applied to Afghanistan must take into account all these factors, otherwise it cannot work effectively.

As for the second condition, national reconciliation is the right path for Afghanistan's government. Negotiation between the government and the Taliban is key to any reconciliation strategy. While negotiation is the right direction, its success is not guaranteed, because the outcome will, in large part, depend on the Taliban. The two sides will come to the negotiating table with incompatible principles and goals. For the Afghan government, the prerequisite for successful reconciliation is that the Taliban must recognize the existing constitution and political system; the Taliban, for its part, is determined to establish an Islamic regime, in the process rejecting the political system, ideology, and values taken from the West. The gap between the two sides is colossal. Further, the Taliban is unlikely to accept a subordinate role in a government, though some small elements of the Taliban may. Overcoming the gap is a real challenge, exacerbated by the Taliban lacking coordination, central leadership, or hierarchical structure, instead consisting of many self-organized groups. As a result, nobody could represent the Taliban as a whole.

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33. Andrey Serenko, a Russian expert on Afghanistan, made a comparative analysis of the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan by the Soviet Union and United States. He concluded that the United States is in a more favorable situation. See Andrey Serenko, "Posle Afganistana: Uroki vyvoda voiisk" [After Afghanistan: Lessons of Troops Withdrawal], February 15, 2011, http://afghanistan.ru/doc/19520.html.

34. Final communiqué of Kabul international conference on Afghanistan, July 20, 2010, http://www.afghanistan-un.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/FINAL-Kabul-Conference-Communique.pdf.

While the future of negotiation between Afghanistan's government and the Taliban is uncertain, maintaining solidarity among the different political groups inside the government could also be a problem. As Sayfullo Safarov, the vice-director of the Institute for Strategic Studies in Tajikistan, pointed out, interethnic relations are the biggest problem for Afghanistan.[35] The fight for power has never stopped, and it could flare up again in the future. This is also reflected in different opinions about the future national power structure: Tajiks and Uzbeks want more power and appeal for decentralizing national power, arguing Afghanistan had never been a state with a strong center.[36] But Pushtu groups insist on a strong national center; they believe a decentralized power structure will split the state, and is totally unacceptable.[37]

International aid, the third condition, is necessary for Afghanistan's government, particularly for the first years after it takes over all the responsibility of governance and security. The Afghan government needs money to run the state and maintain the army and police of more than 300,000 personnel. At present the budget of the Afghan government heavily relies on international aid. It seems unconcerned with financial sustainability for the years ahead. The participants of the London conference on Afghanistan in January 2010 agreed, and the Kabul conference in July 2010 restated, that they will increase the proportion of development aid delivered through the government of Afghanistan from 20 to 50 percent. President Karzai hopes that the international society could help Afghanistan for another 10 to 15 years. According to an analysis by the World Bank and Afghanistan's Finance Ministry, $7 billion a year is needed for the next decade for the Afghan government to cover its expenditures on the security forces, basic services such as health and education, and development projects.[38] However, long-term financial support from the international community is not guaranteed. Suppose that international aid is significantly reduced, or even worse, stopped; the Afghan government could then hardly survive. The history of the Najibula government is a familiar lesson: Falling into crises of its own, the Soviet Union had to break off its assistance to the Afghanistan government, which led to the collapse of Najibula's regime.

Cooperation of the international community in Afghanistan, particularly solidarity among the great powers, could heavily impact the outcome of the Kabul process. If the new "great game" resumes, the future of the Kabul process will be doomed. Although all the great powers declare that they will cooperate on Afghanistan, the foundation of cooperation is not as solid as needed, as demonstrated in the past. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the great powers formed an alliance to fight terrorism in Afghanistan, but the alliance soon weakened, and was broken by the Iraq war. The negative effect of the Iraq war not only distracted the attention and resources of the

35. Ekaterina Ivashchenko, "Saiifullo Safarov: Mezhetnicheskie otnosheniya—glavnaya problema Afganistana" ["Sayfullo Safarov: Interethnic Relations Is the Main Problem of Afghanistan"], Ferghana News Information Agency, June 23, 2011, http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=6999 , 23.06.2011.

36. For example, Akhmad Masud, the leader of Tajik ethnic groups, insists on a decentralized structure of governance. See Ekaterina Ivashchenko, "Akhmad Vali Masud: Mezhdu nami i Karzaem—yestestvennaya bor'ba. My pobedim" ["Ahmad Vali Masud: There Is a Natural Struggle between Us and Karzai. We Will Win"], Ferghana News Information Agency, June 14, 2011, http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=6991.

37. Mikhail Pak, "Federalizatsiya Afganistana mozhet privesti k yego raschleneniyu: interv'yu sovetnika Khamida Karzaya" [Federalization of Afghanistan May Lead to Its Dismemberment: Interview of Adviser of Hamid Karzai], Regnum Information Agency, July 27, 2011, http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1425365.html.

38. Joshua Partlow, "Afghanistan to Need Billions in Aid for Years, World Bank Says," *Washington Post*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-to-need-billions-in-aid-for-years-world-bank-says/2011/11/22/gIQA14zOlN_story.html.

United States from Afghanistan to Iraq, it also caused deep doubts about U.S. policy in Russia and China, causing the international antiterrorist alliance to split apart. Then the sprawl of "color revolutions" reached Central Asia. The SCO asked the United States to make a timetable to withdraw its military bases from the territory of SCO members. This symbolized the end of the "gentlemen's agreement" between the United States and Russia in Central Asia that was reached after September 11, 2001. Geopolitical competition began to take priority over cooperation, though ostensibly both countries continued to say they favored cooperation.[39] As a result, the position of Afghanistan also had changed. As described by some scholars, it became a "sideshow" in the preponderance of bilateral competition—one factor that harmed the effectiveness of the international cooperation in Afghanistan.[40] The United States and Russia managed to resume their cooperative framework in Afghanistan thanks only to the "reset" of bilateral relations in 2009.

The importance of economic development cannot be emphasized enough. Afghanistan is among the poorest states in the world, where more than 70 percent of the population lacks enough food.[41] Promoting the economy of Afghanistan is therefore the most important task. All the other problems of Afghanistan, ranging from security to opium cultivation, could finally be improved and cured through economic development. Although expectation for quickly improving Afghanistan's economy is unrealistic, the Afghanistan government must put the national economy on a track that gives hope to its people, otherwise the Kabul process will not last.

Along with optimistic expectations, there are pessimistic scenarios as well. One of them is that the Afghan government maintains only limited control over the country, with the Taliban unable to seize national power either. The country would be torn up not only politically, but also administratively and geographically. In the worst such case, the country would be divided, with two or more governments. Another scenario is that the Afghan government loses control and the country falls into a new civil war and chaos; some experts believe that civil war is inevitable in Afghanistan after 2014.[42] Yet another possible scenario is that a new national power forms, but with a different balance of power and political basis, and with a new political structure and different ideological orientation.

Finally, one outcome entails the return of the Taliban, which is almost certain to occur; the question is more about the role the Taliban will play. One possibility is that the Taliban returns as a participant within the Afghanistan government, inside the framework of existing political institutions, which would constitute a legal return. Another possibility is that the Taliban returns as a political body equal to the Afghan government, based on a balance of power but beyond the existing political framework. This possibility would also be considered legal, especially if reached through negotiations. The first of these possible outcomes is the most desirable for both the Afghan government and the United States. Although the second outcome is unfavorable to the Afghan government and the United States, it is not at all impossible.

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39. Fedor Lukyanov, "Kirgizskiii polygon" [The Kirghiz Range], April 15, 2010, *Russia in Global Affairs,* http://www.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Kirgizskii-poligon-14826.html.

40. Ashley J. Tellis and Aroop Mukharji, eds., *Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2010), p. 123.

41. The World Bank, *Afghanistan Country Overview 2009*, http://www.worldbank.org.af/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/AFGHANISTANEXTN/0,contentMDK:20154015~menuPK:305992~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:305985,00.html.

42. Ekaterina Ivashchenko, "Konstantin Syroezhkin: Grazhdanskaya voina v Afganistane nyeizbezhna" [Konstantin Syroezhkin: Civil War in Afghanistan Is Inevitable], Ferghana News Information Agency, July 14, 2011, http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=7017.

The essence of the ongoing talks of the Afghan government and the United States with the Taliban is to safeguard a legal return of the Taliban by power sharing. Notably, the Taliban has recently been trying to appear more moderate, promising peaceful relations with neighboring countries and respect for human rights. Some believe that the Taliban has undergone a transformation in recent years, becoming more practical-minded and "soft."[43] If that is true, there is room for optimism that the negotiations will end successfully and that the political dynamics within Afghanistan will change. To the extent this is a real policy shift by the Taliban and not a temporary expedient, steps in this direction would be welcome.

All that said, a third kind of Taliban return—an illegal return—entails the Taliban's overthrowing the Afghan government and seizing control of the country after U.S. and ISAF forces leave, a scenario widely predicted in academic circles. Although this outcome should not be excluded, it is not inevitable. The Taliban is strong enough to persist in fighting a guerrilla war, resorting to such tactics as the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), but such an approach will not be enough to take back national power. The outcome will depend more on factors related to the Afghan government itself, the Afghan National Army (ANA), and the Afghan National Police (ANP) as well as international support to them. As Hekmat Karzai, director of the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies in Kabul, mentioned, the problem is not that the insurgency is strong, but that Afghan institutions are weak.[44]

Of course, any outcome that destabilizes the region and upsets favorable bilateral relations would harm China's interests. So, among all the possible scenarios described above, the first one meets China's interests the most—that is, the Kabul process ends successfully, with the Afghan government maintaining power and gradually stabilizing the situation. Indeed, regarding the Taliban's return, China could not outright oppose it, as long as the return is handled in a legal way. All other scenarios pose serious threats to China's interests, which used to be mainly security, but now economic also.

China has recently been enhancing cooperation with the Afghan government. In the meeting with President Karzai in March 2010 in Beijing, Chinese president Hu Jingtao suggested strengthening the bilateral relations by cooperating in five areas. In the political area, Hu suggested that the two sides should increase mutual contacts and consultation. In the area of trade and the economy, the two sides should increase investment and develop new cooperative projects. In the humanitarian area, China will provide more training opportunities for Afghan professionals. In the security area, China and Afghanistan should enhance cooperation in fighting terrorism, separatism, extremism, and transnational crimes. In the area of multilateral relations, China would encourage Afghanistan to improve relations with neighboring countries and welcome its active role in the

43. The *Wall Street Journal* recently noted that the Taliban has made an effort to appear a more moderate force, promising peaceful relations with neighboring countries and respect for human rights. Robert Dreyfuss, "Talking with the Taliban," January 31, 2012, http://www.thenation.com/blog/165954/talking-taliban. Andrei Rezchikov and Dmitri Trenin believe that the Taliban has learned lessons as well and become more practical. Andrei Rezchikov and Dmitri Trenin, "soedinennye shitaty poluchili urok" [The United States Learned Lesson], January 13, 2012, http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=46980.

44. Carnegie Moscow Center, "Afghanistan: Ways Out of the Crisis," May 10, 2011, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://carnegie.ru/events/?fa=3311.

SCO and other institutions.[45] China plans for the bilateral relations to be long term and intends to establish an "overall cooperation partner relationship." Along with the China-Afghanistan bilateral format and the multilateral platforms, particularly that of the SCO, China has initiated the triangular format of China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan with the aim of enhancing cooperation on regional security and other issues. The first triangular dialogue was held in Beijing in February 2012.

But China, as a realist, is well aware of the serious challenges the Kabul process faces. China is concerned with the future of Afghanistan, understanding it "has some uncertainty," as China's foreign minister mentioned.[46] Song Tao, the vice foreign minister of China, expressed the same worry, indicating that "the situation of Afghanistan is facing an important crossroad. What its future will be would not only influence the rebuilding process of Afghanistan, it will also determine the success of international battle against terrorism."[47] At the same time, China understands that the Afghans are the ones who will decide the ultimate fate of Afghanistan. If the situation takes a bad turn, China will have to face that reality; however, China will make every effort to bring about a positive end.

45. "Hu Jintao yu afuhan zongtong huitan ti zhong a guanxi wuda zhuoli dian" 胡锦涛与阿富汗总统会谈 提中阿关系五大着力点［President Hu Jintao Meets President Karzai], *China Economic Net*, March 24, 2010, http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/201003/24/t20100324_21176545.shtml.

46. "Yang Jiechi: Zhongguo bu fujia renhe tiaojian di xiang afuhan tigongle lisuonengji de yuanzhu" 杨洁篪：中国不附加任何条件地向阿富汗提供了力所能及的援助 [Yang Jiechi: China Does Not Attach Any Conditionality to Its Assistance to Afghanistan], *People's Daily Olina*, March 7, 2010, http://2010lianghui.people.com.cn/GB/181624/11089074.html.

47. "Waijiao bu fu buzhang song tao chuxi shanghai hezuo zuzhi afuhan wenti tebie guoji huiyi" 外交部副部长宋涛出席上海合作组织阿富汗问题特别国际会议 [Speech of Mr. Song Tao, Vice Foreign Minister of PRC on the International Conference on Afghanistan in Moscow], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 27, 2009, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gjhdqzz/lhg_59/xgxw/t554788.htm.

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