

Afghanistan and China's new neighbourhood diplomacy

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Afghanistan occupies an intriguing place in China's neighbourhood diplomacy. Of all China's boundaries with its 14 continental neighbours, that with Afghanistan is the shortest, spanning only 92.45 kilometres where the two countries meet at the Wakhan Corridor, located between the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush. The environment here is forbidding, the mountain roads are perilous and the passage is arduous. Population is sparse on both sides of the border. On the Chinese side is Taxkorgan County in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, which is mainly populated by people of Tajik ethnicity. The border has no official customs post, there is little coming and going by the locals, and there are few of the commercial activities commonly seen in China's many other border regions. The Wakhan Corridor was once a portion of the ancient Silk Road, the route that carried the cultural exchange between China and central, southern and western Asia. It was also part of Xuanzang's famous journey to the West, through which he brought the Buddhist classics back to China. But relations between China and Afghanistan no longer being what they once were, the Wakhan is no longer a thoroughfare. Its real function is not so much to link China and Afghanistan together as to separate them.

Afghanistan has played a marginal role in Chinese diplomacy for a considerable period. From the 1950s until the 1980s, the Soviet Union was Afghanistan's most important political, economic and security partner, and Afghanistan was mostly in the Soviet sphere of influence.¹ While Afghanistan was mired in civil war in the 1990s, the Taliban seized control in 1996. From 2001 until 2014, the United States and NATO were engaged in military action in Afghanistan.² With large numbers of American troops continuously stationed in Afghanistan, the United States was a dominant influence in Afghan affairs.

It was the intensification of security concerns in Xinjiang with the Taliban's rise to power that initially drew China's attention to Afghanistan in the 1990s.³ But the results of this attention were negative: it did not pull China and Afghanistan closer

¹ Zhao Huasheng, 'Russia and the Afghanistan issue', *China International Studies*, no. 28, May/June 2011, pp. 140–62.

² Thomas Waldman, 'Reconciliation and research in Afghanistan: an analytical narrative', *International Affairs* 90: 5, 2014, pp. 1049–68.

³ Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan: China's interests, stances, and perspectives*, Russia and Eurasia Program report (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), March 2012), p. 3.

together, but on the contrary pushed them further apart. China's main concern was with the close connections between the Taliban and terrorists and extremists linked to the 'Eastern Turkistan' terrorist organizations.⁴ It was also anxious lest the chaos and instability in Afghanistan spread over the border and undermine Xinjiang's stability. This led China to distance itself from the Taliban regime and cut links with Afghanistan. China did not recognize the Taliban regime and made no attempt to develop a relationship with it.

After Afghanistan's new government was established in 2002, Chinese–Afghan relations changed, as the two countries began to draw closer. China firmly supported the new regime of President Hamid Karzai, delivering aid and also investing heavily in the Afghan economy.⁵ In 2012, it endorsed a decision by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to make Afghanistan an observer of the regional body.⁶ Through all these channels, the relationship between China and Afghanistan has progressively deepened, and Afghanistan's importance in China's eyes has grown.

In 2014, US and NATO forces largely withdrew from Afghanistan. The question of who would fill the 'vacuum' thus created became a topic of heated discussion.⁷ Some observers believed that China should use its ever-increasing prominence among the world's powers to take over the role formerly played by the United States, and indeed some claim that it has already begun to do so.⁸

Regardless of whether one agrees with such suggestions and claims, it is clear that Afghanistan's significance in China's foreign policy and diplomacy is on the rise. This is not only the result of a 'power vacuum' resulting from the departure of US forces and of Afghanistan's own changing circumstances. It is also because Afghanistan has become part of China's new neighbourhood diplomacy.⁹

This article will investigate China's new neighbourhood diplomacy, which provides a significant context for an understanding of its Afghanistan policy; analyse the security challenges posed to China by the situation in Afghanistan; explain the reasons behind China's increased interest in Afghanistan; evaluate China's strategic goals in Afghanistan; and consider whether China is filling the 'vacuum' in Afghanistan left by the withdrawal of US and NATO combat forces.

⁴ In 2003 China's Ministry of Public Security announced a list of the first four affirmed 'East Turkistan' terrorist organizations. They are the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, the Eastern Turkistan Liberation Organization, the East Turkistan Information Center and the World Uighur Youth Congress: <http://www.chinanews.com/n/2003-12-15/26/381066.html>, 15 Dec. 2003. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 20 May 2016.)

⁵ Zhao, *China and Afghanistan*, pp. 5–6.

⁶ The SCO was founded in 2001 with the aim of promoting security and economic and humanitarian cooperation among member states. At present it has six members (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), two candidates for membership (India and Pakistan), four observers (Mongolia, Iran, Afghanistan and Belarus) and six partners for dialogue (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Cambodia).

⁷ Anthony H. Cordesman, *US strategic vacuum in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and central Asia* (Washington DC: CSIS, 26 Sept. 2014).

⁸ Raffaello Pantucci, 'China's leadership opportunity in Afghanistan', 2 April 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/04/02/china-s-leadership-opportunity-in-afghanistan/>.

⁹ 'Forging ahead with determination, playing the main melody of Asian cooperation', comments by Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin's on Asian situation and neighbourhood diplomacy, 31 Dec. 2013, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zjyh_665391/t1114403.shtml.

China's new neighbourhood diplomacy

Relations with neighbouring states have always been important in Chinese foreign policy considerations. This is a matter not of chance, but rather of history and geography.¹⁰ China has the longest land borders of any country in the world, stretching more than 22,000 km along territorial boundaries with 14 countries. It has a further eight maritime neighbours, and many near neighbours as well.¹¹ Geopolitically, China's neighbourhood relations are extremely complex, as the country numbers several 'hot spots' in its immediate vicinity, such as the Korean Peninsula, Afghanistan, the East China Sea and the South China Sea.¹² The circumstances in each of China's various neighbour countries, most of which are post-colonial states, vary enormously. Historical border and territorial disputes between China and its neighbours continue to present challenges to post-colonial state-building in east Asia today. This factor has an enduring influence on the relationships between China and its neighbours.

China's 'new neighbourhood diplomacy' refers to a number of initiatives that the new leadership under Xi Jinping has undertaken as part of its regional foreign policy.¹³ The 'new' in the phrase does not mean that previous policies have been abandoned, but rather suggests an adjustment, development and upgrading of policies still based on their original foundations. China's new neighbourhood diplomacy has a number of notable features. Most importantly, relations with neighbouring countries have risen to the top of China's diplomatic priorities. A statement once frequently used in the domestic discourse to characterize Chinese diplomacy is that: 'Great power relations are crucial, the relationship with neighbouring countries is primary, developing countries are the foundation, and multilateralism is the main stage.'¹⁴ This formulation reflects the four main emphases of China's diplomacy, with an implicit ranking in order of importance. Particular emphasis has certainly been placed hitherto on Great Power relations. But times have changed, and arguably Great Power relations and neighbourhood relations have swapped places in terms of their priority and importance in Chinese foreign policy considerations. While Great Power relations remain one of the top priorities, China's neighbourhood has gained a new significance in the country's diplomacy and foreign policy. This shift was partially confirmed at the Central Work Conference on China's Neighbourhood

¹⁰ Jinghan Zeng, Yuefan Xiao and Shaun Breslin, 'Securing China's core interests: the state of the debate in China', *International Affairs* 91: 2, March 2015, pp. 245–66.

¹¹ China's continental neighbours are Russia, Mongolia, North Korea, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. Its maritime neighbours are South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. If Thailand and East Timor are included, China has eight maritime neighbours, as stated on the Chinese government's website: <http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/>.

¹² See Katherine Morton, 'China's ambition in the South China Sea: is a legitimate maritime order possible?', *International Affairs* 92: 4, July 2016, pp. 909–940 in this issue.

¹³ In October 2013 the Central Committee of the CPC held a meeting dedicated to neighbourhood diplomacy. Xi Jinping, the General Secretary, attended the meeting and made the keynote speech on 25 Oct.: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1093113.shtml.

¹⁴ 'Xi Jinping's diplomatic strategy of "New type of Great Power relations"', 13 Feb. 2016, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2016-02-13/doc-ixpmpqt1137133.shtml>.

Diplomacy, held by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2013.¹⁵

There is sound reasoning behind the increasing attention paid by China to its neighbourhood and neighbouring sub-regions. China has gradually realized that becoming a power centre in the regional international system is a logical outcome of its rise.¹⁶ International history shows that as powers rise, their influence always spreads first to neighbouring countries, and that they rely on these surrounding regions to achieve further development and greater strength. So it is with the rise of China, not only because of its unique geopolitical location, but also because of its diplomatic traditions and ideology.¹⁷ Traditionally, China espoused a concept of centre and periphery, perceiving itself as the 'central state'.¹⁸ Although China's historical tributary system is not in keeping with the principles of today's international relations, the idea that China and its neighbouring countries have a historical special relationship remains valid. As Wang Jisi has argued, from the geopolitical and geo-economic perspective today's China does indeed occupy a central position, viewed from all directions, and it has become a veritable 'central state' not only of the region, but also of the world.¹⁹

Moreover, China's relations with its neighbours have historically had significant influence on its politics, economy, security and diplomacy. Positive relations with the countries on its periphery help to build a safe environment, improve its strategic position, strengthen its diplomatic resources and expand its international influence. Without positive neighbourhood relations, China cannot become a cohesive Great Power peacefully. If its neighbourhood is chaotic and unstable, it is difficult to ensure its own national security. If its neighbourhood relations are strained and troubled, China's hands will be tied and its diplomatic activity and foreign policy initiatives in the region and on the world stage are likely to be frustrated.²⁰

Although China has always paid attention to its relations with neighbouring countries, until very recently its neighbourhood diplomacy has not been considered as an organic whole in terms of an overarching foreign policy strategy. Diplomacy towards neighbouring countries tended to be conducted bilaterally, focusing on specific issues, even with China's deepening involvement with regional multi-

¹⁵ The holding of a central work conference devoted to China's neighbourhood diplomacy is unprecedented in the PRC's history. President Xi Jinping and all other Politburo Standing Committee members of the Chinese Communist Party attended the conference together with hundreds of high-ranking party and government officials.

¹⁶ Yan Xuetong, 'Neighbourhood in general is more important than the US', 15 Jan. 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0115/c70731-26390151.html>.

¹⁷ Yongjin Zhang, 'The idea of order in ancient Chinese political thought: a Wightian exploration', *International Affairs* 90: 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 167–83.

¹⁸ In the Chinese language the name 'China' actually means 'central state'.

¹⁹ Wang Jisi claims that at its current stage of development, China is neither part of the global North nor exclusively part of the global South; nor does it belong to either East or West. Straddling both divisions, China has indeed become a 'central state'. As a continental power based on the Eurasian continent, it should adopt a strategy of maintaining stability in the East and marching West. See *Guancha* [Observer], 5 Aug. 2013, http://www.guancha.cn/wangjisi/2013_08_05_163671.shtml.

²⁰ Mark Beeson and Fujian Li, 'What consensus? Geopolitics and policy paradigms in China and the United States', *International Affairs* 91: 1, Jan. 2015, pp. 93–109.

lateralism through the SCO and ASEAN. The new neighbourhood diplomacy is aimed at changing this by embodying a set of new ideas. The Chinese leadership has put forward new guiding principles for China's new neighbourhood diplomacy, summarized as 'amity, security, mutual benefit and inclusiveness' (*qin, cheng, hui, rong*).²¹ These principles are informed by traditional Chinese philosophy and are a thoroughly Chinese formulation, difficult to translate or interpret in other linguistic and cultural contexts. They may, nevertheless, be elaborated from a Chinese perspective as follows. To practise 'amity' is to uphold good-neighbourly relations and give mutual help and protection: it implies an equal and emotional relationship that is active and interactive, and that should touch citizens' hearts. 'Sincerity' means that interactions with neighbouring countries should always be genuine, aimed at gaining more friends and partners; should value friendship and loyalty; and should place justice above material benefits. 'Mutual benefit' indicates cooperation with neighbouring countries in a way that is beneficial for all. 'Inclusiveness' entails an inclusive mindset in promoting regional cooperation with China's neighbouring countries, manifest in cultivating shared opportunities and meeting collective challenges in common efforts to create common prosperity.

The grand strategic goal of China's new neighbourhood diplomacy is the creation of a community of common destiny, based on these guiding principles, which links its fate with those of all its neighbouring countries through thick and thin. At the same time, it has also proposed that this community of common destiny should be based upon a balanced approach to justice and interests, in which justice takes pride of place and interests are pursued in recognition of that priority and of the principles of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness.

The two landmarks in this new policy are the proposed 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the 'Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road'. In September 2013, in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the creation of the Silk Road Economic Belt.²² The initiative called for the integration of the countries situated on the ancient Silk Road through central Asia, west Asia, the Middle East and Europe into a cohesive economic area, to be achieved by building infrastructure, increasing cultural exchanges and broadening trade. In October the same year, President Xi proposed in Indonesia the creation of the Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road as a complementary initiative aimed at investing and fostering collaboration in south-east Asia, Oceania and North Africa through several contiguous bodies of water—the South China Sea, the southern Pacific Ocean and the wider Indian Ocean area.²³ These two proposals were jointly dubbed 'one belt, one road' (OBOR), and are now promoted together as a strategic concept guiding China's new and organic approach to its neighbourhood diplomacy. Increasingly, the Chinese government is framing its

²¹ The concept was first expressed by Xi Jinping: Xi Jinping, 'Let the sense of the community of common destiny in the neighbouring countries take root', 25 Oct. 2013, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1093113.shtml.

²² Speech by Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University, 7 Sept. 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/2013-09/08/c_117273079_2.htm.

²³ 'Work together to build China-ASEAN community of common destiny', 4 Oct. 2013, <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2013-10-04/083928357329.shtml>.

new neighbourhood diplomacy in long-run strategic terms with frequent reference to OBOR.

In academic debate in China, many scholars see the proposed OBOR as part of the country's 'marching West' strategy, itself first proposed in 2012 within the academic discourse.²⁴ Among the basic ideas articulated by its advocates are the following. China's development in east Asia has been severely limited by American power, as Sino-American competition has increasingly become a zero-sum game in the region.²⁵ In contrast, areas to China's west—central Asia, west Asia and to some extent south Asia—which have seen rapid growth of Chinese influence and interest, are not strictly controlled by the United States. Given this situation, China should implement a 'marching West' strategy. The key benefits of such a strategy include helping to balance the relationship between China and the United States by avoiding strategic competition and thus promoting strategic trust between the two; fostering further cooperation with countries to China's west; and supporting China's own Greater West development strategy.²⁶

Chinese scholars have offered different understandings and explanations of what drives OBOR.²⁷ There is nevertheless a consensus that the diplomatic goal is not the only driver. Most imaginative, and also most contentious, are the economic explanations. In my view, OBOR has three mutually supporting politico-economic goals. The first, in diplomatic terms, is the construction of regional systems of cooperation with marked Chinese leadership, with a view to promoting closer relations between China and the countries concerned, particularly those in China's neighbouring regions. The second, in international economic terms, is to build more extensive and denser transport and communication networks and infrastructure in the regions concerned, thereby promoting trade and investment and closer economic cooperation. The third, in terms of domestic economic development, is to support China's outward investment and export of its surplus production capacity and to promote China's western regional development.

President Xi Jinping has put his personal stamp on the evolution of OBOR from a set of ideas into a new national strategy to promote China's global interests and domestic development.²⁸ This is perhaps why the Chinese leadership as a whole has attached great importance to the realization of OBOR. In February 2015 a small leading group was created at the top level of the party and the State Council, headed by Vice-Premier Zhang Gaoli, to provide strategic leadership for the construction of OBOR.²⁹ In March 2015, a key policy document entitled *The*

²⁴ Professor Wang Jisi is widely regarded as one of the first advocates of the 'marching West' strategy. See Wang Jisi, "'Marching West': rebalancing China's geopolitical strategy', *Guancha* [Observer], 17 Oct. 2012, http://www.guancha.cn/wang-ji-si/2012_10_17_104219.shtml.

²⁵ Wang Jisi, "'Marching West'".

²⁶ Wang Jisi, "'Marching West'".

²⁷ Some view OBOR mainly from the domestic angle, believing it to be primarily driven by, and aimed at, domestic needs and goals; others see it primarily in the international context, as a strategy to balance the US 'shift to Asia'.

²⁸ Xi Jinping, 'Speed up construction of the Economic Belt of the Silk Road and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road', 6 Nov. 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-11/06/c_1113146840.htm.

²⁹ 'The central government leading group of OBOR emerged', 1 Feb. 2015, <http://news.china.com/domestic/945/20150202/19268585.html>.

vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road was jointly issued by the National Commission of Development and Reform, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce.³⁰

In support of this project, the Chinese government is prepared to invest a considerable amount of capital in the construction of OBOR. In October 2014, China led the initiative to create the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) together with 22 other Asian countries.³¹ The AIIB is to have US\$100 billion in authorized capital and a voting structure based upon the GDP of member states. The Bank was officially established in June 2015 in Beijing with the signing of articles of agreement by 50 out of 57 prospective founding members.³² The articles were signed by the remaining seven members between 29 June and 31 December 2015.³³ In parallel to the initiative to set up the AIIB, the Chinese government announced in November 2014 that it would provide US\$40 billion to establish the Silk Road Fund in order to support financing for the construction of OBOR.³⁴ The Silk Road Fund is different from the AIIB in that it is owned and operated by China alone. To date, the Silk Road Fund has made three large-scale investments: one of around US\$165 million in the Karot hydropower station project in Pakistan, in April 2015;³⁵ one in support of ChemChina's acquisition of Italian tyre-maker Pirelli, in June 2015;³⁶ and the third and most recent in the purchase of 9.9 per cent of the shares of a liquefied natural gas project launched by the Russian company Novatek.³⁷

The OBOR proposals have elevated the strategic importance of China's neighbouring regions in China's pursuit of peaceful rise, as these regions are vital, geopolitically and geo-economically, for the construction of OBOR. Without shrewd and accomplished neighbourhood diplomacy, successful construction of OBOR would not be possible. To the extent that OBOR caters to the needs of regional states for new construction of transport and communication infrastructure it is conducive to promoting regional cooperation, as it is complementary to local initiatives, such as Kazakhstan's new economic policies under the banner of the 'Bright Road' and Mongolia's initiative of constructing the 'Prairie Road'. It is also complementary to infrastructure projects supported by the Asian Development Bank in these regions.

³⁰ *Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, issued with State Council authorization, 8 April 2015, http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zt_beltandroad/news/201504/20150400945674.shtml.

³¹ 'History of AIIB', <http://www.aiib.org/html/aboutus/introduction/history/?show=0>.

³² The articles of agreement remained open for signing by the remaining prospective founding members until the end of 2015. See AIIB, '57 representatives attend special ministerial meeting on AIIB's establishment', http://www.aiib.org/html/2015/NEWS_0629/10.html.

³³ Signing and ratification status of the articles of agreement of the AIIB: <http://www.aiib.org/html/aboutus/introduction/Membership/?show=0>.

³⁴ Xi Jinping, 'Speech on host partner dialogue of "enhancing interconnection partnership relationship"', *People's Daily*, 9 Nov. 2014.

³⁵ 'China's Silk Road Fund makes first investment in Pakistan's hydropower project', *Xinhua News (English)*, 21 April 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-04/21/c_134167533.htm.

³⁶ 'Silk Road Fund joins ChemChina in industrial investment in Pirelli & C.SpA', *China Daily*, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2015-06/05/content_20923643.htm.

³⁷ 'China's Silk Road Fund purchases shares from Russian company', *Xinhua News (English)*, 3 Sept. 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/03/c_134587397.htm.

At the same time, however, China's neighbourhood regions in central, west and south Asia present daunting challenges. For one thing, domestic conditions in the central Asian states concerned are not conducive to Chinese investment, given the prevalence of security challenges of various kinds and social and political instability. For another, the image of China in these countries is not entirely positive. The idea of China as a threat, though not necessarily in a military sense, still has purchase in some central Asian states.³⁸ China faces a challenge to its soft power in influencing the way it is perceived in these countries. OBOR has also been perceived by some in India as a strategic challenge to India's dominant position in the subcontinent.³⁹

There are other, geostrategic challenges. One is the impact of OBOR on Russia's entrenched interest in central Asia, and hence on China's relationship with Russia. More specifically, how can the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt be carried out without impinging upon the development of the Eurasian Economic Union, led by Russia? While some Chinese scholars believe that the two projects can be developed side by side, and even in cooperation, others are concerned that the Russians may have very different ideas.⁴⁰ For them, central Asia 'belongs' to Russia, and China is an unwelcome strategic competitor here. The construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt encroaches upon the Russian spheres of influence and impinges on Russia's plan for regional integration. As one Russian scholar pointed out:

Many see China's 'Silk Road Economic Belt' initiative, first unveiled by Xi on a 2013 trip to Kazakhstan, as an attempt to drive Russia out of the region, where Moscow is trying to promote its own integration project, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). It's widely believed that it's just a matter of time before clashes occur between the two integration projects.⁴¹

With these reservations in mind, President Xi Jinping actively sought close cooperation with Russia when first proposing the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt back in September 2013.⁴² Since then, both Chinese and Russian leaders have made efforts to address the challenge, with a considerable degree of success. In a joint declaration issued at the end of President Putin's visit to China in May 2014, the two countries committed themselves to 'seeking coordination between the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the consolidation

³⁸ Zhao Huasheng, 'Constructing a positive image: the challenge for China's deepening engagement with central Asia', *Journal of Xinjiang Normal University* (Philosophy and Social Science edn) 36: 4, 2015, pp. 65–76.

³⁹ Pang Zhongying, 'India remains a hindrance in constructing OBOR', *Guancha* [Observer], 28 Feb. 2015, http://www.guancha.cn/PangZhongYing/2015_03_04_310947.shtml; Harsh V. Pant and Julie M. Super, 'India's "non-alignment" conundrum: a twentieth-century policy in a changing world', *International Affairs* 91: 4, July 2015, pp. 747–64.

⁴⁰ Li Xiujiao, 'Doubt will not be erased easily: is Russia really supporting the OBOR or is its support just an expedient tactic?', *Siberia Studies*, 16 Feb. 2016, <http://www.chinaru.info/News/zhongtetegao/39626.shtml>.

⁴¹ Alexander Gabuev, 'Eurasian Silk Road union: towards a Russia–China consensus?', *The Diplomat*, 5 June 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/06/eurasian-silk-road-union-towards-a-russia-china-consensus/>.

⁴² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'President Xi Jinping delivers important speech and proposes to build a Silk Road Economic Belt with central Asian countries', 7 Sept. 2013, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesjgtfshzffh_665686/t1076334.shtml.

of the Eurasian Economic Union'.⁴³ In May 2015, President Xi Jinping and President Putin again issued a joint declaration, this one specifically stating that China and Russia had reached a consensus 'on cooperation in coordinating development of EEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt' with the goal of building a 'common economic space' in Eurasia, including a free trade agreement between the EEU and China.⁴⁴ It is clear that some compromise has been reached between China and Russia, as both sides see benefits in coordinating the two projects in their respective pursuit of grand strategic goals.

A more general geo-strategic challenge for the implementation of China's OBOR strategy is Great Power competition, particularly between China and the United States.⁴⁵ China's neighbouring regions have always been important platforms for geopolitical and geo-economic competition between the Great Powers. Although both China and the United States are striving to cooperate in many areas, there are also areas of marked competition, though this is not always confrontational. Winning partners and friends among China's neighbouring states is one such area of competition. In sharp contrast to maritime east Asia, central Asia is not a region in which the United States has treaty allies and partners, and China is not competing with the United States for influence in this region. Nevertheless, OBOR covers several geopolitical regions, and the geostrategic challenge posed by American power cannot be overestimated.

Afghanistan and security challenges to China

Afghanistan presents a number of security challenges to China. First, over the past 35 years, Afghanistan has been mired in a succession of wars and conflicts. It was occupied by the Soviet Union for ten years, experienced eleven years of civil war, and was for 14 years the epicentre of America's war against terrorism. Long-term war and instability have battered the country, leaving the economy in tatters and the people destitute. Not only have these conditions denied Afghanistan peace and stability; they have also had negative effects on bordering regions and countries. Although, as noted above, the border between China and Afghanistan is a short one and the latter has long played a secondary role in the former's neighbourhood diplomacy, the lack of peace and stability in Afghanistan remains a constant concern for the government in Beijing, given the vulnerability of its western frontiers in general. Afghanistan, for example, has become one of the largest sources of narcotics trafficked to China.

Second, and more specifically, the internal security and stability of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region are particularly vulnerable to the spillover of terrorism and extremism from Afghanistan. The Afghan–Xinjiang security nexus

⁴³ See 'China–Russia joint statement on a new stage of comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination', 20 May 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1157763.shtml.

⁴⁴ See 'Joint statement on cooperation in connection between the Silk Road Economic Belt and Eurasian Economic Union', 9 May 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1262143.shtml. See also Gabuev, 'Eurasian Silk Road union'.

⁴⁵ Joachim Krause, 'Assessing the danger of war: parallels and differences between Europe in 1914 and East Asia in 2014', *International Affairs* 90: 6, Nov. 2014, pp. 1421–51.

can be seen in particular in the close linkage between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and the 'East Turkistan' terrorist groups, which can be traced back to well before 11 September 2001.⁴⁶ Among the detainees at Guantánamo Bay, 22 were in fact Uighurs.⁴⁷ Terrorists associated with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement continue to cause security problems in Xinjiang. Worse still, they have spread to cities outside Xinjiang, seriously affecting not only the Autonomous Region's political and social security, but that of China as a whole.⁴⁸ In such circumstances, the importance of Afghanistan to China's national security is clear. If Afghanistan does not stabilize, it will continue to be an incubator for terrorism and extremism, a source of external pressure on Xinjiang and a powerful factor increasing the difficulty of solving the security problem there.

Third, terrorism and instability in Afghanistan affect not only China itself, but also regions in the neighbourhood, in particular central Asia, whose states together share 2,300 kilometres of borders with Afghanistan and 3,300 kilometres of borders with China. Central Asia has its own security concerns with terrorism and extremism;⁴⁹ but Afghanistan remains the greatest external destabilizing factor for central Asian countries. If terrorism and extremism in central Asia are allowed to grow unchecked, Xinjiang will certainly be affected very seriously, because not all China's borders with central Asian states are like that with Afghanistan—that is to say, short and, therefore, easily shut and controlled. China's borders with its three central Asian neighbours are long, with large numbers of people crossing at many places. These borders cannot be closed off, and are therefore more susceptible to the spread of terrorism and extremism. A related issue is that any instability or loss of governmental control in central Asia would directly endanger China's economic security, in particular the security of oil and natural gas pipelines. There are already two oil pipelines between China and central Asia, and four natural gas pipelines (including Line D, which is under construction); these are easy targets. On a broader scale, central Asia is the door to the west for China's Silk Road. If central Asia were to become unstable, successful construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt would be extremely difficult, perhaps impossible.

Finally, it should be noted that Afghanistan lies at the crossroads of central, south and west Asia, and therefore has particular geopolitical and geo-economic importance. Afghanistan is an unavoidable factor in any type of cooperation in these regions. Considered negatively, Afghanistan is like a lock that can cut off central, south and west Asia from each other. Considered positively, it is the key that can open the door to collaboration between these areas. It can be both of

⁴⁶ State Council Information Office, 'The "Eastern Turkistan" terrorist forces are guilty', 21 Jan. 2002, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/3586/20020121/652705.html>.

⁴⁷ Zhao, *China and Afghanistan*, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Since 2013, China has seen several serious instances of domestic terrorism, including the attacks at Tiananmen Square in October 2013 and at Kunming railway station in March 2014. At the same time, terrorist activities in Xinjiang have continued, including attacks in Bachu (Maralbexi) County in April 2013, in Xinhe (Toksü) County in December 2013, July 2014 and November 2014, in Uqturpan County in February 2014, and in Luntai in September 2014.

⁴⁹ Local terrorist groups active in central Asia include the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir, among others.

these to the Silk Road Economic Belt. Only when the Afghan lock is opened can the Silk Road Economic Belt realize the interconnections between these regions economically, financially and socially. If it remains closed, any progress in implementing this initiative will be greatly impeded.

Increasingly dynamic China–Afghan diplomacy

Since 2012, when China's current leaders took office, their diplomacy towards Afghanistan has been more active and dynamic, and China has been more closely involved in supporting Afghanistan's political transition and reconstruction. As China's ambitious attempts at constructing OBOR have further elevated the strategic importance of Afghanistan in Beijing's overall foreign policy strategy, more concrete steps have been taken in forging closer ties with Afghanistan. At the same time, China has greatly increased its aid to Afghanistan, with strengthened humanitarian cooperation.⁵⁰

As China pursues more active policies towards Afghanistan, interactions between the two countries' leaders and high-ranking officials have increased, in particular visits of Chinese officials to Afghanistan. This was especially clear in 2014, a critical year for Afghanistan's political transition, as President Karzai stepped down after 13 years in office and as US and NATO forces planned to end their combat role in the country. In November 2014, Chinese Minister of Public Security and State Councillor Guo Shengkun visited Afghanistan to discuss bilateral cooperation to guard against and crack down on terrorist activities connected with the 'East Turkistan Islamic Movement'.⁵¹ In the same month, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Deputy Chief of Staff, Qi Jianguo, visited Afghanistan as President Xi Jinping's special envoy.⁵² While in Kabul, he met with Afghanistan's national security advisers, the Minister of Defence, the Minister of the Interior, the Head of the National Directorate of Security and the Army Chief of Staff. In February 2016 Fang Fenghui, the chief of the Joint Staff of the Central Military Commission, visited Afghanistan and met with President Ghani.⁵³ Such frequent visits by high-ranking diplomatic, security and defence officials in the space of one year had not been seen since the creation of Afghanistan's government, and clearly indicated the increased importance of Afghanistan in Beijing's eyes. In October 2014, Afghanistan's newly elected President Ghani visited China,⁵⁴ making his first

⁵⁰ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 'General situation of economic and trade cooperation between China and Afghanistan', 31 Jan. 2015, <http://af.china-embassy.org/chn/zagx/ztgk/t1097560.htm>.

⁵¹ 'Meeting of Guo Shengkun with President of Afghanistan: determined to combat terrorist forces of the "Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement"', 1 Dec. 2014, <http://news.china.com/domesticgd/10000159/20141201/19028539.html>.

⁵² Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 'General situation of China–Afghanistan political relations', 31 Jan. 2015, <http://af.china-embassy.org/chn/zagx/ztgk/t1097558.htm>.

⁵³ Afghanistan President Meeting with Fang Fenghui, 1 March, 2016, http://www.mod.gov.cn/diplomacy/2016-03/01/content_4645532.htm.

⁵⁴ 'President Xi Jinping holds talks with President Ghani', 28 Oct. 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/gjhdq_603914/gj_603916/yz_603918/1206_603920/xgxw_603926/t1204905.shtml.

foreign visit since taking office. His choice of China as his first destination shows that he too values the role it can play in Afghanistan's future. Indeed, the joint statement issued after his visit to Beijing confirms that China and Afghanistan are deepening their strategic partnership, and will further develop their cooperation in political, economic, cultural, security and international affairs.⁵⁵

While engaging in bilateral cooperation with Afghanistan, China has taken a number of initiatives in the region to facilitate regional cooperation in support of Afghanistan's transition and transformation. For this purpose, it has launched bilateral and trilateral talks with the key players in the region, Pakistan, Russia, India and Iran, each of which plays an indispensable role in the resolution of issues related to peace and stability in Afghanistan, and it has created mechanisms to discuss the Afghan question in collaboration with them: bilateral mechanisms with Pakistan and Iran, and trilateral mechanisms with Russia and India, Russia and Pakistan, and Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the time of writing, both bilateral mechanisms have held talks twice; the China–Russia–Pakistan trilateral mechanism once; the China–Russia–India trilateral mechanism twice; and the China–Afghanistan–Pakistan trilateral mechanism four times. In February 2015, the Chinese–Afghan–Pakistani talks were elevated to the status of trilateral strategic dialogue, with the first dialogue being held in Kabul.⁵⁶

In October 2014 China hosted the fourth ministerial conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan.⁵⁷ This region-led dialogue, also referred to as the 'heart of Asia' mechanism, which consists of 14 local countries and 17 supporting countries all over the world with the aim of promoting political, security and economic cooperation in Afghanistan and neighbouring regions, was established in 2011 to provide a platform to discuss regional issues, and in particular to encourage security and political and economic cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours to tackle common threats, including terrorism, narcotics and extremism.⁵⁸ In hosting the Istanbul Process as a multilateral cooperation mechanism led by regional countries, China hoped to use this platform to advocate a number of principles as a basis for progress in Afghanistan. The five principles articulated by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during the conference were: first, Afghanistan should be led by the Afghans; second, political reconciliation should be promoted in an attempt to reach a political solution that is generally accepted and widely supported; third, economic renewal should be striven for; fourth, Afghanistan's own path to development should be explored; and fifth, strong external support should be provided.⁵⁹ In total, 46 countries and international organizations were

⁵⁵ 'Joint statement on deepening strategic partnership by the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan', 29 Oct. 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1205144.shtml.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'First round of China–Afghanistan–Pakistan trilateral strategic dialogue held in Kabul', 10 Feb. 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1236606.shtml.

⁵⁷ The fourth ministerial conference was originally scheduled for August, but was postponed to October because of the presidential election in Afghanistan.

⁵⁸ It is called the 'Istanbul Process' because the first meeting was held in Istanbul, Turkey. China is one of the founding members of the Istanbul Process, but 2014 was the first time it hosted the conference. The second ministerial conference was held in Afghanistan's capital Kabul in June 2012 and the third in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in April 2013.

⁵⁹ Li Keqiang, 'Opening statement to the fourth ministerial conference of the Istanbul Process', 31 Oct. 2014,

present at the meeting, the scale of which surpassed that of all three previous conferences.⁶⁰ The United States participated as one of the 'supporting nations'. The Beijing ministerial conference was successful in pushing forward the Istanbul Process, with the Beijing Declaration issued at its conclusion outlining 64 cooperative programmes of particular importance.⁶¹

In February 2015, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Afghanistan and showed his country's support for Afghan political, security and economic transition. During his visit, Wang Yi urged the international community to provide critical assistance to Afghanistan in four main ways, reflecting China's latest ideas and policy priorities for the country: by helping the Afghan people work together to create an effective government; by supporting political reconciliation among all factions, including the Taliban; by aiding the reconstruction of Afghanistan's economy; and by assisting Afghanistan's entrance into regional cooperation.⁶²

China's support for Afghanistan has clearly grown. Between 2001 and 2013, China provided a total of 1.52 billion renminbi (approximately US\$250 million) in humanitarian aid and trained more than 1,000 professionals.⁶³ In 2014 alone, China provided 500 million renminbi of humanitarian aid, and promised to provide another 1.5 billion renminbi (a total of US\$330 million) over the next three years. China also agreed to train 3,000 Afghan professionals and provide 500 scholarships in the five years from 2015 to 2019.⁶⁴ All of these commitments far exceed previous levels.

What is China's ultimate strategic goal in Afghanistan?

Active diplomacy is only a means, not an end in itself. So what is driving China's active diplomacy towards Afghanistan? What is its strategic goal? There are both international and domestic elements to the answer. The international element derives from concern about a vacuum resulting from the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, which creates uncertainty about the future of Afghanistan as well as challenges to the regional security architecture. This forces China to take on more regional responsibility.

The domestic element relates to the changes discussed above that have been initiated as part of China's new neighbourhood policy. Afghanistan's participation in the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt, particularly in respect

http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1206165.shtml.

⁶⁰ All 14 founding member countries participated, joined by a further 16 supporting countries and twelve international organizations. Four countries and organizations attended as guests of the host country, China.

⁶¹ Wang Yi, 'Explaining the three main outcomes of the Beijing ministerial conference of the Istanbul Process and urging all parties to carry out the "Beijing Declaration" to bring Afghanistan lasting peace', 1 Nov. 2011, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/gjhdq_603914/gj_603916/yz_603918/1206_603920/xgxw_603926/t1206424.shtml.

⁶² Wang Yi, 'Resolving the Afghanistan issue requires the strengthening of four types of support', 12 Feb. 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1237243.shtml.

⁶³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'China and Afghanistan's bilateral relations' (last updated Aug. 2014), http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/gjhdq_603914/gj_603916/yz_603918/1206_603920/sbgx_603924/.

⁶⁴ 'Joint statement on deepening strategic partnership by the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan', 29 Oct. 2014.

of infrastructure development and interconnection, is essential. Afghanistan is one of the land gateways through which China can gain access to Iran and west Asia. Geographically, there are several possible routes: one is directly via Pakistan and Afghanistan to Iran; another is through Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan to Turkmenistan and on to Iran. China's preference is for a traffic route via Tajikistan and Afghanistan to Iran.⁶⁵ This route has the advantages of being short in distance and offering China the opportunity to develop projects in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

China also has economic interests to advance in Afghanistan itself, including its investment in developing the Aynak copper mine and the Amu Daria oil field. Both of these projects face many difficulties,⁶⁶ and China is in continuous negotiation with the Afghan government in search of a breakthrough in their development.⁶⁷

Traditionally, China has been careful not to become involved in the development of Afghanistan's domestic politics and has not tried to mediate in its domestic conflicts. This position seems to be changing, with indications that China is prepared to help break Afghanistan's deadlock and drive forward the process of political reconciliation in the country. In February 2015 Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated: 'For a long time, Afghanistan has suffered the upheaval, poverty, and the chaos of war. It is time for this phase to end.'⁶⁸ In comparison to the previous Chinese government's statements, this assertion represented a new kind of confidence in pressing for the resolution of Afghanistan's internal strife, and a change in China's approach. In January 2015, the media reported that China had received a group of Taliban representatives in December 2014.⁶⁹ This attracted much attention, and some analysts speculated that China was facilitating talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.⁷⁰ The Chinese government has not confirmed this. However, during a joint press conference with the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Minister Wang stated that: 'We sincerely call on Afghanistan's political factions, including the Taliban, to seize the opportunity, make decisions, discard past grievances, and look into the future and participate in the political reconciliation process as soon as possible to jointly discuss major plans

⁶⁵ The Ministry of Transport has adopted the draft of OBOR, with a focus on infrastructure building and integrated transportation. See China Reform, 4 June 2015, http://www.chinareform.org.cn/open/news/201506/t20150604_226892.htm.

⁶⁶ See 'New challenges and problems for China Metallurgical Group and Jiangxi Copper Corporation's Afghan projects', 28 Aug. 2013, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/stock/t/20130828/073816588345.shtml>; and 'Ministerstvo shakht IRA: Kitai khochet peresmosret kontrakt na pazrabotky mestorozhigenuya Aynak' [Ministry of mines IRA (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan): China wants to revise contract to develop the Aynak mine], 28 Aug. 2013, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/63609.html>; also Pantucci, 'China's leadership opportunity in Afghanistan'.

⁶⁷ The advancement of both projects was mentioned in the joint statement made during Afghan President Ghani's visit to China in October 2014. See 'Joint statement on deepening strategic partnership by the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan', 29 Oct. 2014. In February 2015, China's Ambassador to Afghanistan, Deng Xijun, met with Afghanistan's Minister of Mining and Oil and again specifically mentioned the issue of pushing forward with the two projects. See 'Official visit between the Afghanistan Ambassador, Deng Xijun, and Minister of Mining and Oil', 15 Feb. 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/gjhdq_603914/gj_603916/yz_603918/1206_603920/1206x2_603942/t1238181.shtml.

⁶⁸ Wang Yi, 'Resolving the Afghanistan issue requires the strengthening of four types of support'.

⁶⁹ Shannon Tiezzi, 'China hosted Afghan Taliban for talks: report', *The Diplomat*, 7 Jan. 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/china-hosted-afghan-taliban-for-talks-report/>.

⁷⁰ Tiezzi, 'China hosted Afghan Taliban for talks: report'.

for Afghanistan's peace and development.⁷¹ In another of Foreign Minister Wang's speeches, he made it clear that one of China's main policies towards Afghanistan was to promote political reconciliation.⁷² This can be taken as a strong indication that China has already made a policy decision to mediate domestic political reconciliation in Afghanistan. For China, diplomacy is the logical channel for such mediation. Accordingly, in July 2015, the Afghanistan government and the Taliban held their first formal peace talks in Pakistan, in the presence of Chinese (and American) officials.⁷³

China is arguably in a good position to undertake such mediation. It has a relatively good political image in Afghanistan, as it consistently promotes Afghan-led and Afghan-owned policy, respects the country's independence and sovereignty, and actively promotes political reconciliation there.⁷⁴ Furthermore, China did not participate in the Afghan war from 2001, has not aroused the dislike of any political faction, and is relatively easily accepted by all. Another point in China's favour is that it maintains good relations with both the Afghan government and the government of Pakistan, and has managed to have non-confrontational relations with the Taliban. This puts China in a position of being able to talk with all three major players in the Afghan peace negotiations. In addition, China maintains cooperative relations with the United States, the most influential Great Power in solving the Afghanistan issue.

China has been cautious in its approach towards the Taliban. Rather than voicing frequent and harsh condemnation of the Taliban by name, it has adopted a calmer and more low-key tone. It takes the view that the Taliban are not only an extremist religious group, but a real political force as well, and as such could be an enduring phenomenon in the Afghan political arena.⁷⁵ Given this assessment, China takes a long-term perspective towards the Taliban. Tactically, it wishes to reduce as far as possible the Taliban's potential for harm, given their historical link with the 'East Turkistan Islamic Movement', which Beijing regards as the source of terrorism in Xinjiang. However, it also wishes to avoid provoking direct conflict with the Taliban where possible, believing it could bring more harm to China.⁷⁶

Pakistan's nickname in China is 'iron buddy', meaning an absolutely reliable friend; and Sino-Pakistan relations are characterized as an 'all-weather strategic partnership'. Given this closeness, China can exert more influence on Pakistan than other states. Of Afghanistan's relations with its neighbours, those with Pakistan

⁷¹ Wang Yi, 'China is willing to play constructive role in peaceful reconciliation process of Afghanistan', 1 Nov. 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_663354/2676_663356/2678_663360/t1207127.shtml.

⁷² China's Foreign Minister believes that China's role in Afghanistan consists of aid, investment, training, facilitating dialogues between all of Afghanistan's factions, and supporting better relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours. See Wang Yi, 'China is a supporter, contributor, and builder in the Afghan issue', 1 Nov. 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/gjhq_603914/gj_603916/yz_603918/1206_603920/xgxw_603926/t1206425.shtml.

⁷³ Jethro Mullen and Sophia Saifi, 'Afghan officials hold talks with Taliban in Pakistan', CNN, 8 July 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/08/asia/afghanistan-taliban-meeting-pakistan/>.

⁷⁴ Wang Yi, 'Three issues should be properly handled to address the Afghan situation', 11 Nov. 2013, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/wshd/t1098115.shtml>.

⁷⁵ Zhao, *China and Afghanistan*, pp. 8–9.

⁷⁶ Zhao, *China and Afghanistan*, p. 9.

are the most complicated. Many believe that Pakistan's intricate relationship with the Taliban is one of the main reasons for Afghanistan's current predicament. Under Chinese coordination, China, Afghanistan and Pakistan have not only held many talks, but have also created a mechanism for strategic dialogue, as noted above. Further, as a regional power, China has strong influence and is an able coordinator among Afghanistan's neighbouring countries, whose cooperation and policy coordination are instrumental to the resolution of the Afghan issue. Such coordination can be facilitated by the SCO, of which most of Afghanistan's neighbours and near neighbours are members.

China also has many economic resources to promote its strategic and economic goals. Humanitarian aid is only one aspect of how China helps Afghanistan. More importantly, China wants to develop economic cooperation with Afghanistan and help it to develop a self-sustaining economy, as in the proverb: 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.' As China promotes the Silk Road Economic Belt, there are many opportunities and possibilities for cooperation. This will give Afghanistan considerable economic benefit, and will also promote Afghanistan's participation in the region's economic development. In promoting economic development in Afghanistan, China emphasizes that stability is the prerequisite for development; but it is not interested in exporting its own economic development model. Its view is, rather, that the Afghan people and government should adopt a development model that fits their country's specific characteristics and conditions. There is no ready-made development model for Afghanistan, which has a unique history and national situation, and these must be reflected in its political and economic development model. Afghanistan must therefore search for a viable political model and developmental path that will enable it to fulfil its national aspirations.

Is China filling the 'vacuum' in Afghanistan?

China's active diplomacy has been said to be an attempt at 'filling the vacuum' left following the departure of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan.⁷⁷ The idea of 'filling a vacuum' is a concept clearly influenced by realist thinking about Great Powers engaging in geopolitical competition for regional hegemony. However, the basic pattern of relationships between China, the United States and Europe in Afghanistan is one of cooperation rather than competition.⁷⁸ The stationing of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan came about in the course of the so-called 'war on terror', that is to say, in special and temporary circumstances. The withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan represents a return to the normal state of affairs. From this perspective, the departure of US and NATO forces has not left a vacuum; on the contrary, Afghanistan has returned to being

⁷⁷ 'Could China fill NATO's vacuum in Afghanistan?', *The World*, 5 Nov. 2014, <http://www.theworldweekly.com/reader/view/magazine/2014-11-05/could-china-fill-natos-vacuum-in-afghanistan/2632>.

⁷⁸ John Kerry, US Secretary of State, Afghan Foreign Minister H.E. Salahuddin Rabbani, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, 'Remarks at the high-level event on Afghanistan', 26 Sept. 2015, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/09/247362.htm>.

a normal country. The withdrawal of those forces has, however, bequeathed to Afghanistan an unpredictable future. The stakes attached to the security situation in Afghanistan are getting higher. As a regional power, China intends to take on more responsibility with a view to maintaining stability and security in Afghanistan, both in its own interests and in the interests of the region. It is wrong-headed to see China's diplomatic activities and other initiatives in its new approaches to Afghanistan as 'filling a vacuum'. As China takes on more responsibilities, some in the United States may feel uncomfortable with rising Chinese influence, regarding it as betokening some corresponding loss on their part.⁷⁹ Such a response reflects an ambivalent attitude towards China's activity in Afghanistan.

The growth of China's influence in Afghanistan, in particular since the departure of American forces, is largely the result of a rapid development in bilateral relations. It will not result in China taking the United States' former position in Afghanistan, for a number of reasons. In the first place, China has no intention of sending troops to Afghanistan; it could not replace the American and NATO forces even if it wished to, and it does not seek to engage with Afghanistan militarily in any manner. Second, China has no intention of bringing Afghanistan under its exclusive influence or treating the country as part of its sphere of influence. Third, China does not have any intention of exporting its political or economic model to Afghanistan. Furthermore, the United States, which has a bilateral security treaty with Afghanistan, continues to exert great influence in the country's political and security affairs. In other words, one could argue that even with the departure of American and NATO troops from Afghanistan, there is no vacuum left to fill.

A further refutation of the 'filling the vacuum' claim is the explicit inclusion of the United States among all the concerned countries with which China is willing to cooperate in the resolution of Afghanistan's problems and national reconstruction. In October 2014, during the fourth ministerial conference of the Istanbul Process held in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with US presidential aide and leader of the American delegation John Podesta.⁸⁰ At the meeting, he made it clear that China was willing to 'strengthen communication and cooperation with the United States in order to play a constructive role together in Afghanistan's political reconciliation and peaceful rebuilding'.⁸¹ Indeed, China and the United States have already been cooperating in Afghanistan, for example by training Afghanistan's diplomats.⁸² And, as noted above, China and the United States were the two Great Powers present at the first formal peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, held in Pakistan in July 2015.⁸³ In January 2016 China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United States

⁷⁹ Zalmay Khalilzad, 'Why Afghanistan courts China', *New York Times*, 3 Nov. 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/04/opinion/why-afghanistan-courts-china.html>.

⁸⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Wang Yi meets with US presidential aide Podesta', 31 Oct. 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/gjhdq_603914/gj_603916/yz_603918/1206_603920/xgxw_603926/t1206012.shtml.

⁸¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Wang Yi meets with US presidential aide Podesta'.

⁸² Two rounds of Sino-American joint training of young Afghan diplomats took place in May 2014 and December 2013. Participating Afghan students spent 15 days studying in China and the same in the United States.

⁸³ Mullen and Saifi, 'Afghan officials hold talks with Taliban in Pakistan'.

formed a four-party coordination group which has met five times in less than half a year.⁸⁴ China has also expressed its appreciation of triangular cooperation with Afghanistan and the US in the area of development.⁸⁵ Both China and the United States have reason to expand their cooperation in promoting a smooth political transition and political reconciliation in Afghanistan. With the threat of international terrorism and extremism hanging over all countries, promoting the peace process in Afghanistan and maintaining this region's stability is of particular importance for the two Great Powers.

Conclusions

Afghanistan has occupied a more prominent place in China's foreign policy towards its neighbouring countries since 2012. This is in part because the Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping initiated a new neighbourhood diplomacy in 2013, putting relationships with neighbours at the top of the Chinese foreign policy agenda. The pursuit of the construction of OBOR has further elevated the strategic importance of these neighbouring regions in China's pursuit of its peaceful rise and further development.

As one of China's neighbouring states and a regional 'hot spot', Afghanistan has naturally gained new importance for the Chinese government, which has accordingly pursued active engagement with Kabul. As discussed in this article, China has forged close ties with Afghanistan in terms of intensified interactions between leaders and high-level officials, and has also significantly increased its bilateral aid. More importantly, perhaps, China has worked in close consultation with Afghanistan's neighbours and near neighbours in seeking support for the political transition and reconciliation in Afghanistan. China has even played a significant mediating role, together with Pakistan and the United States, in bringing the Afghan government and the Taliban together for peace talks.

This more active Chinese involvement with Afghanistan came about at a time when American and NATO forces were leaving the country; but claims that this represents a strategic ambition on China's part to 'fill the vacuum' left by the US withdrawal and seek domination of the region are misguided. China has limited strategic and security goals in developing its relations with Afghanistan and has in fact worked together with the United States, for example in mediating the talks between the Kabul government and the Taliban and in training the Afghan military. To the extent that Afghanistan remains a challenge to China's new neighbourhood diplomacy and its strategy to construct OBOR, China's limited strategic and security goals can only be realized in working together with, not against, other Great Powers and regional states that have vested interests in peace and stability in Afghanistan.

⁸⁴ The Foreign Ministry's Special Envoy for Afghanistan Deng Xijun attended the fifth meeting of the Coordination Group for Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States, 19 May 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw_673019/t1364757.shtml.

⁸⁵ China–Afghanistan Joint Statement, 18 May 2016, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1364496.shtml>.