

## ISSUE PERSPECTIVE

*“Unlocking the full potential  
of the U.S.-India relationship”*

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**China Reaches Out to India on Afghanistan**

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The counterterrorism dialogue between China and India finally took a serious turn this year as the two sides discussed the issue of Afghanistan for the first time. The impending departure of Western forces from Afghanistan and the specter of looming chaos seem to have persuaded Beijing that it cannot ignore the ‘Af-Pak’ challenge forever. The two sides decided to initiate a long overdue dialogue on Afghanistan which took place April 18 in Beijing.

The Sino-India counterterrorism dialogue, which has been held annually since 2002, was initially viewed as a promising bilateral initiative for dealing with the threat of terrorism. But these hopes were quickly laid to rest as nothing of consequence emerged from these dialogues. The reason is not difficult to decipher. For India, the main source of terrorism is Pakistan where the state machinery has continued to view terrorism as a legitimate tool of national policy to further their interests vis-à-vis India. For China, Pakistan is an important asset in its South Asia policy and an “all weather” friend. As a consequence, where New Delhi had, somewhat audaciously, expected to make common cause with Beijing vis-a-vis Islamabad and Rawalpindi, there was only disappointment at the outcome of these dialogues.

But as concerns are rising in the region about the consequences of the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan next year, China is showing some nascent interest in coordinating with India on this issue. There is a clear convergence between China and India as both states have made major investments in Afghanistan since 2002. The impact of Afghanistan’s destabilization will be felt not only in Kashmir but also in Xinjiang where the East Turkistan Islamic Movement is leading a separatist movement. China has also indicated that it is not sure if Pakistan’s security establishment actually continues to exert influence over the Taliban and other extremist groups given the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Pakistan.

China and India both have reiterated that a regional approach is necessary in order to maintain peace and stability in Afghanistan after the departure of Western forces next year. According to some reports, the two sides have agreed to support the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to play a greater role in Afghanistan and discuss anti-terror cooperation within the framework of the ‘Istanbul Process’ agreed upon in 2011. Towards that end, trilateral consultations between China, India and Russia were recently held in Moscow and, in order to maintain regional balance, were followed by China-Russia-Pakistan discussions in Beijing.

Though it is indeed encouraging that Beijing is finally recognizing the need to work with India on Afghanistan, given regional geopolitics New Delhi will be treading cautiously as it moves forward with its dialogue with Beijing.

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Since 2001, China has adopted a hands-off policy towards Afghanistan, preferring the United States to do most of the heavy lifting. It did not want a serious involvement in Afghanistan but it also did not want a victory for the extremists given its negative impact on China's problems with Uighur separatists in Xinjiang. Apart from the \$3 billion Aynak copper-mine project, China also did not make a significant attempt to project its economic power in Afghanistan. But as the departure of Western forces from Afghanistan approaches, China has upped its game in Afghanistan. In 2007 that the state-owned China Metallurgical Group Corporation secured a 30-year lease on Mes Aynak in Afghanistan's Logar province. Though progress has been slow and Afghan insurgents have targeted the mine, Beijing expects to extract \$100 billion worth of copper from the site. China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has also helped Afghanistan in setting up the country's first commercial oil production site which is likely to extract 1.5 million barrels of oil annually from 2013. China's humongous appetite for resources will ensure that Afghanistan, with over \$1 trillion in potential mineral wealth, gets adequate attention from Beijing. With China's backing, Afghanistan became an observer in the SCO. China has also signed a strategic partnership agreement with Kabul. More significantly, Beijing has access to the Taliban through Pakistan, and was the only non-Islamic nation in touch with Mullah Omar in the late 1990s.

It is true that the deteriorating internal security situation in Pakistan has strained Sino-Pakistan ties in recent years, to some degree. China Kingho Group, one of China's largest private coal mining companies, pulled out of what was to be Pakistan's largest foreign-investment pact, citing concerns for the security of its personnel. Amid worries about the potential destabilizing

influence of Pakistani militants on China's Muslim minority in Xinjiang, Beijing has also taken a harder line against Pakistan. The flow of arms and terrorists from across the border in Pakistan remains a major headache for Chinese authorities, and Islamabad's inability and/or failure to curb extremism makes it difficult for the Chinese to trust Pakistan completely. But it is equally the case that China, at least publicly, has continued to emphasize that its relationship with Pakistan is far more important than isolated incidents of violence.

In this context, few in New Delhi expect Beijing to change its Afghanistan policy significantly to suit Indian interests. The road to stability in Kabul lies through Rawalpindi, and China has few incentives to challenge the Pakistani security establishment's traditional adversarial mind-set vis-à-vis India that continues to look at Afghanistan for some chimerical 'strategic depth.' Notwithstanding recent positive signals emanating from China, New Delhi is unlikely to find a fully cooperating partner in Beijing in the management of post-2014 turmoil in Afghanistan. But a dialogue between Asia's two mainland powers on Afghanistan is certainly worth pursuing. As the expression goes, they both have 'skin' in this game.

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