The Other Power: Security and Diplomacy in Sino-Afghanistan Relations

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Since the arrival of American led-coalition forces in Afghanistan in late 2001 for what would be an extended military operation, China has been forced to reexamine its policies toward Kabul on several different fronts. Aside from ensuring that extremist groups from Afghanistan did not threaten security in China’s sensitive far-western frontier, the changing status of Afghanistan also presented possibilities for greater bilateral diplomatic and economic engagement between Beijing and Kabul. Moreover, Afghanistan’s evolving politics over the past decade has also influenced much of China’s foreign policy in both Central and South Asia. Beijing has responded to these myriad challenges by adopting a multifaceted approach to Afghanistan and to the regions surrounding the country.

What has changed over the past 10 years, however, is that while security remains of great concern to China when engaging with Afghanistan, hard or military security concerns are gradually giving way to longer-term political and increasingly economic policies, which may bind the two states together in a much stronger fashion. This development will have an effect on American policy in Afghanistan just as Washington contemplates a future strategy toward Afghanistan and a greater South Asian engagement. While it is unlikely that Beijing will seek an accelerated Western withdrawal from Afghanistan or attempt to develop a sphere of influence, it is becoming more apparent that China has now assumed the position of “the other power” in Afghanistan’s foreign policy, and it will be up to Beijing, its neighbors and the United States (U.S.) to decide whether cooperation or competition will be the result of Beijing’s increased influence there. Afghanistan is increasingly
becoming a pivot state within a process of “soft balancing” power behavior between the U.S. and China in the greater Eurasian region, with India and Pakistan also participating. Since the U.S. is seeking to formally withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the question of the degree to which Beijing will increase its influence in Kabul will only grow in importance.

**Historical background**

The bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and China dates back centuries, to a time when the politics of both nations differed considerably. In 1950, the then Kingdom of Afghanistan formally recognized the People’s Republic of China, among the first states to do so after the People’s Republic was declared the previous year. Beijing, however, was initially unwilling to reciprocate due to lingering concerns about the close relationship Kabul enjoyed with the West at that time, in particular, military ties with the U.S. At the same time, the newly consolidating Maoist government in Beijing was keeping a nervous eye on its far west, including Tibet and Xinjiang, to ensure that they did not drift into Soviet or colonial British influence, and therefore viewed Central Asia as a massive region fraught with potential instability due to great power machinations. Chinese recognition of the Afghan kingdom ultimately occurred in 1955, with diplomat Ding Guoyu being appointed as the first Chinese ambassador, followed by visits to Kabul by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and Vice-Premier He Long 2 years later. However, since 1957, no Chinese leader has visited Kabul.

Bilateral relations soured during the pro-Soviet coup in Kabul by the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan led by Noor Mohammad Taraki in 1978. This resulted in a Treaty of Friendship between Kabul and Moscow later that year, a document that was viewed by Beijing as cementing Soviet influence in the country and representing a direct threat to Chinese regional interests; Beijing responded by breaking ties with Kabul.\(^1\) Once again, Afghanistan became embedded in Chinese perceptions as a stage for great power competition. During this period, Beijing found itself on the side of the U.S. and Pakistan by supporting anticommunist mujahideen rebels and assisting with the transfer of heavy weapons, including Soviet-era conventional weapons and mines, to Afghan rebel forces in the 1980s.\(^2\) After the U.S. recognized Beijing in early 1979, the door opened wider for greater Sino–American information sharing about Soviet military policy in Central Asia.

Following the fall of the last Afghan communist government led by President Najibullah in 1992, Chinese attempts to rebuild relations with the successor government of Burhanuddin Rabbani were frequently thwarted by the deteriorating security situation, which led to a civil war in Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban and their subsequent seizure of Kabul in 1996. The rise of the Taliban ignited concerns in Beijing about links between Islamic