



# CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 11/2021

28 June 2021

## China's 'Soft Military' Ambitions in Afghanistan

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**Keywords:** China, Afghanistan, ANDSF, Wakhan Corridor, Military Cooperation



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Historically, China has been on the periphery of the great power politics in Afghanistan—the 'graveyard of empires.' During the Cold War, Beijing made minimal security contributions to Afghanistan limited only to covert assistance to the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia in arming Afghan Mujahideen to counter Soviet forces.<sup>1</sup> With the end of the Cold War, Beijing has been vocally opposed to Washington's war presence in the country and has had, at best, a lukewarm attitude towards the U.N. mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). However, this is not to suggest that China has no interest or engagement with Kabul—in fact to the contrary, Beijing has been steadily increasing its presence in the country especially since 2014 when ISAF ended combat operations and Afghanistan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) assumed full responsibility for the security of the nation. In 2016, China offered approximately \$73 million worth of military aid to Afghanistan which included logistical equipment, parts of military vehicles, ammunitions and weapons for ANDSF.<sup>2</sup> Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan Yao Jing hailed it as the "beginning of our regular military-to-military exchanges and cooperation."<sup>3</sup> Although this number fails poorly compared to Washington—which has committed at least \$4 billion annually over the past decade—before this Chinese military aid to Kabul was restricted to training and security equipment's, rather than offensive arms.<sup>4</sup>

### **Chinese security interests in Afghanistan**

Even a decade ago, China's primary interests in Afghanistan were largely economic— to gain access to the country's hotbed of minerals and resources. However, the commercial rationale has now been eclipsed by its more immediate security agenda. Beijing's immediate focus is preventing the spillover of militancy and extremism into the politically sensitive areas of Xinjiang. Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor—a narrow strip of land that borders China, Tajikistan and Pakistan—poses a serious security threat to Beijing as the rugged terrain makes it conducive to serve as a conduit for terrorists to enter Chinese territory. With increasing Chinese economic investments, including moves to extend CPEC to Afghanistan<sup>5</sup>—Beijing is directly threatened by political instability in Afghanistan. In the past, political instability and deteriorating security situation have been at least partly responsible for stalling projects such as the \$2.9 billion Mes Ayank deal with two Chinese state owned companies— China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) and the Jiangxi Copper Company Limited.<sup>6</sup> Several Chinese companies have already indicated their desire and preparedness to invest over \$400 in Afghanistan's energy sector.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Kabul has already begun construction of the \$5 million road in Pamir to connect with China—for the first time—via a land route, which is likely to further boost Chinese investment in the country.<sup>8</sup> China's increasing profile in Afghanistan however, comes at the potential cost of making the country more vulnerable to terrorist attack. Beijing acknowledges this, as

was evident from Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's statement at the recently concluded second China-Central Asia (C+C5) meet where he urged his Central Asian counterparts to crack down on terrorist forces and prevent transnational crimes to create a "safe Silk Road."<sup>9</sup>

### **Chinese military presence in Afghanistan**

Beijing has expanded its military presence in Afghanistan over the last decade, although the exact nature of this presence remains shrouded in mystery. In 2017 "overwhelming evidence" including "photographs, an eyewitness account and several confirming statements of diplomats and observers, among them a Chinese official familiar with the matter" of Chinese forces patrolling in eastern Afghanistan's Little Pamir region emerged.<sup>[10]</sup> Beijing has officially denied military patrols or the presence of Chinese troops in the region but has conceded to conducting "joint counterterrorism" operations with Afghanistan—following a bilateral cooperation agreement signed in 2016 to strengthen border law enforcement. However, the sighting of Chinese manufactured military vehicles, together with Beijing's lack of clarity on what entails 'joint terrorism operations' has raised more questions, than answers over the nature and extent of their military cooperation. In 2018 a certified Russian news agency reported that China—which already has a base at Kyrzyrabort, Tajikistan, just 12km from the Wakhan Corridor<sup>11</sup>—will provide all financial and logistical assistance to build a military base in Badakshan, quoting then Afghan Defence Ministry Spokesperson Gen. Dawlat Wazir, albeit denied by Beijing.<sup>12</sup> More recently, 10 Chinese nationals believed to be linked to China's spy agency, Ministry of State Security, were arrested by Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security for allegedly having ties with the Taliban-aligned Haqqani Network. Reports suggest that after only 23 days in detention, the spies were released and sent back to China without any formal charges.<sup>13</sup> This has raised concerns about a possible Chinese spy network in Kabul and the possibility of a China-Pakistan partnership that extends to intelligence sharing.

### **China's future security engagement with Afghanistan**

Despite being vocally opposed to Western military presence in the country, China has been one of the major beneficiaries of U.S. military presence in the country. Beijing was largely able to advance its commercial interests in Afghanistan as America disproportionately bore the security burden of ensuring stability in the country, crucial for economic investments. For Chinese policy experts, U.S. withdrawal presents both a challenge and opportunity.<sup>14</sup> On one hand, China fears that the delicate power equilibrium will be adversely affected by Washington's 'hasty' withdrawal of troops, resulting in a spiral of violence and chaos. Afraid of the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, the Chinese embassy in Kabul has urged its nationals to leave the country.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, China has

been aware of a possible 'security vacuum' in the country since NATO ended its combat operations in 2014—and is now much better placed to play a central role in the post conflict reconstruction process. China has maintained relations with all Afghan administrations except for the pro-Soviet governments (1979-1989) and has even nurtured ties with the Taliban. Indeed, in recent times China has increased its frequency of visits with the Taliban leaders and Beijing has been opaque about the nature of these discussions. Most likely, China is using its contacts with Pakistan to establish close ties with the Taliban, hoping they would not allow militants to infiltrate Xinjiang.<sup>16</sup>

China's national security law permits international military security cooperation, including UN peacekeeping operations, relief and rescue operations and other missions to protect China's overseas interest. A prominent Hong Kong based newspaper even reported that China may send a peacekeeping force to Afghanistan, which has garnered a lot of international attention.<sup>17</sup> It is unlikely that Beijing will deploy permanent PLA troops on Afghan soil anytime soon and will continue its current policy of avoiding direct military presence in the country. For now, it seems that China will adopt the multilateral route to protect its security interests in the country, rather than a unilateral approach that risks jeopardizing the "current advantageous hedging position" it enjoys with both Taliban and Kabul.<sup>18</sup> However, it is clear that with the NATO and American troop withdrawal, China will have to find a way to protect its security interests. Counterterrorism will remain the top priority for Beijing, arguably subservient to its economic cooperation goals. With the increasing possibility of trans border threat, China will continue to maintain its 'soft military' presence which broadly includes the "temporary deployment of armed forces for overseas military exercises, as well as the deployment of military patrols, peacekeeping forces, military trainers, and consultants. It can also entail building overseas munitions warehouses, joint intelligence facilities, aerospace tracking facilities, earthquake monitoring stations, technical service and military replenishment stops, maintenance bases, and military teaching institutions."<sup>19</sup> However, in the event of a successful political settlement between the Afghan government and Taliban, which China is now trying to broker, it is likely that Chinese bilateral security, possibly military assistance will scale up considerably.

## Notes

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