A ROADMAP FOR SINO-INDIAN CO-OPERATION IN AFGHANISTAN

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Royal United Services Institute

OCCASIONAL PAPER
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As NATO and Western powers begin to take a backseat in Afghanistan’s future, one of the most pressing questions is what role regional powers, particularly China and India, can play in helping the country to become a prosperous and stable nation. Numerous efforts are already underway through multilateral and bilateral forums, yet the key to regional co-operation in securing Afghanistan’s future lies through closer interaction between Beijing and New Delhi. This paper – which draws on a research project spanning a number of workshops in Beijing, New Delhi and Qatar, and involving influential thinkers and experts from China, India, the UK and Afghanistan – maps out specific ideas that policy-makers in Beijing and New Delhi can explore as avenues for co-operation. Post-2014 Afghanistan will remain a major regional concern for at least the short to medium term. The earlier that China and India can develop workable collaborative undertakings, the sooner they can forge a stable and prosperous neighbourhood.

Sino-Indian Ties

Heralding 2014 as the ‘Year of China–India Friendly Exchanges’, Chinese State Councillor Yang Jiechi declared that ‘Since the beginning of the 21st century, China and India have both embarked on a modernization drive and become the world’s most dynamic emerging markets.’ This was followed by the visit to China of Indian Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh who, in the middle of election season, visited Beijing as part of a blossoming strategic dialogue between the two countries. While longstanding tensions over a disputed border and the countries’ differing relationships with Pakistan continue to act as irritants to the bilateral relationship, the past year has seen some notable diplomatic successes that both sides seem eager to sustain following the investiture of the new administration of Narendra Modi.

Progress has been made on the Sino-Indian border dispute through the creation of a code of conduct – the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement – that promises regularised dialogue between special representatives from the two sides. An agreement was also signed to renew and even enhance hydrological information-sharing, which, while failing to address India’s deeper concerns about China’s damming of the Yarlung Zangpo River (which, downstream, flows through India as the Brahmaputra River), at least allowed authorities on both sides to claim they are talking about the problem. Progress has also been made through a regularised counter-terrorism dialogue, which now allows special forces from the two countries to conduct regular joint exercises. In April, a visit to India by a senior People’s Liberation Army (PLA) delegation, headed by Deputy Chief of General Staff Lieutenant General Qi Jianguo, also paved the way for closer military-to-military ties that had been
in deep freeze during recent years. The trend in the Sino-Indian relationship, despite the occasional hiccups, is towards closer co-ordination on a wide spectrum of issues. And while the election season in India interrupted any major initiatives between Beijing and New Delhi, both sides agree that there exists a potential for a better relationship between the two Asian powers. Commenting to the press before meeting with his visiting Indian counterpart in April 2014, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin stated ‘we are confident that promoting the China-India friendship is a shared consensus of all political parties in India.’ Affirming this, President Xi Jinping highlighted how India was a ‘priority’ for Chinese diplomacy when meeting with new Vice President Mohammad Hamid Ansari in the first official visit by the Modi administration to China.

The Chinese government has extended its congratulations and best wishes to Prime Minister Modi following his resounding victory in the recently concluded elections in India. Prior to the election’s resolution, Vice Foreign Minister Liu had already pointed out that Modi was ‘not an unknown quantity’ to China. The new Chinese administration under President Xi Jinping, which came to power in January 2013, has placed a particular premium on its border relationships and there has been a clear signal in the past few years that China is increasingly focused on what Wang Jisi, dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, has termed ‘Marching Westward’. Both powers have increasingly looked to their common Central Asian backyard as an area which might yield possible trade links, and not just as a region from which security concerns might emanate.

There is a perceptible convergence of the two countries’ interests in Afghanistan, where both Asian giants have invested a great deal and are increasingly seeking ways to co-operate. So far, this has remained at a largely rhetorical level, but as NATO and Western interest in Afghanistan diminishes, the two Asian powers will increasingly find themselves in a position to help steer the country towards a more prosperous and stable future. This task may not be as daunting as it seems; indeed, on quite a few issues, there is sufficient unanimity between China and India. Both countries concur that the rehabilitation of Afghanistan should be ‘Afghan-owned and Afghan-

1. Ananth Krishnan, ‘China “Confident” that Good Ties “Consensus of All Indian Parties”’, The Hindu, 14 April 2014.
and there is strong agreement on the importance of investment and economic development. Even in relation to co-operation on Afghanistan’s security, which is complicated by the differing attitudes of the two countries towards Pakistan and its militant proxies, Delhi and Beijing see eye-to-eye on a number of fundamental issues. Both confront a similar domestic threat from terrorism and extremism and worry about overspill in this regard from Afghanistan, yet neither sees the answer to this problem in sending troops into the country to ensure security of its borders. Co-operation between China and India regarding Afghanistan, therefore, is best structured using a three-pillar approach – security, economics and politics – with a fourth pillar of regional co-operation playing a supporting role that bolsters the other three. Taken together, these three aspects offer a stable platform upheld by China and India on which Afghanistan can construct its future.

Security
The key to Afghanistan’s future is security. Without security, economic and political stability is unlikely to grow and the country will remain unattractive to external investors. The first round of the recent election campaign – held in April – was relatively secure, demonstrating that the nation’s security forces are becoming more capable in terms of maintaining the country’s security, but they still face considerable difficulties. Ultimately, Afghanistan is a country with significant economic potential that has so far remained underdeveloped, in part due to the dominance of warlords or insurgents. However, the problems of insurgency and warlordism are in part fed by an underdeveloped economy that weakens the influence and capacity of the central state. The solution to these problems is not immediately apparent, but Afghanistan’s long-term stability is ultimately contingent on the as-yet distant goal of a strong economy – something that will, in turn, be dependent to some degree on the cessation of, or reduction in, violence. For China and India, bolstering what green economic shoots are visible must be prioritised in order to guarantee the country’s long-term stability.

However, in the short term, more direct measures can be taken by both China and India to strengthen the government and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). India has already instituted a programme with Russia to bolster ANSF capability, and China has provided some support to both the military and the police in the form of equipment. Furthermore, the two countries already play a role in supporting and training the ANSF: following senior Chinese Politburo member Zhou Yongkang’s visit in September 2012,

China agreed to train some 300 members of the Afghan National Police (ANP) over four years, while India has provided training to at least 650 Afghan special forces and officers.

However, in the context of the total number of ANSF personnel, which currently stands at 352,000 and will probably shrink to 228,500 (in line with the declarations made at NATO’s Chicago Summit in 2012), China’s and India’s contributions to training are minimal. So while their physical proximity means that China and India are the countries most likely to feel the immediate impact of growing instability in Afghanistan following NATO’s departure, their contributions do not reflect this fact. This is at least in part because neither power is eager to become too closely involved in the difficult quandary of Afghan security, having watched NATO and the West struggle over the past decade. The way forward is thus to find a way for China and India to contribute more to Afghanistan’s security, but to do so in support of an Afghan-led solution.

In practice, this could mean continuing to limit the deployment of kinetic forces, but expanding the number of all ranks of ANSF personnel being trained by China and India. The numbers are currently small and, while both countries have suggested that they are willing to contribute more, these words are yet to be acted upon. If both countries were to increase the number of ANSF that passed through their training regimes annually, it would provide a boost to the ANSF’s capability both physically and psychologically. Focusing these training missions on units that might be of direct support to Chinese and Indian interests might be a way of strengthening the rationale for this ongoing contribution to the ANSF’s development. This could involve training an elite unit to provide diplomatic security at embassies or consulates, or to provide training for ANSF regarding border security and crisis management. If this plan succeeds, China and India could expand the programme by training a mineral-assets protection force – potentially drawing on the more than 100,000 men currently under arms who are due to be demobilised over the next two years in accordance with the Chicago Summit Declaration. These forces could then provide security at the many Chinese or Indian-owned mining sites in Afghanistan, which are likely to be a focus of both countries’ economic activity there in the immediate future and will also form a substantial part of the country’s future tax base. In this regard, China and India could discuss their possible security co-operation as part of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan after 2014 through the many

established mechanisms, including the diplomatic-level Strategic Dialogues, or the Defence and Security Consultation between defence ministries.

Of course, China and India do not agree on all security-related issues, and these differences can feed into mutual suspicion or even hostility. For example, Beijing and Delhi maintain opposing views on whether the Afghan Taliban can be reconciled; to what extent the insurgency is being directed by the Pakistani state, as opposed to rogue elements within it; and whether Kabul should structure its army around counter-insurgency tasks rather than conventional war-fighting.

Yet at the same time, China, India and Afghanistan also agree on the need to counter terrorism originating from within Afghanistan and the threat posed by a renewed and strengthened Taliban. As Chinese President Xi Jinping observed – having met with outgoing Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Sochi, Russia, on the fringes of the Winter Olympics – ‘China is ready to strengthen co-operation with Afghanistan in fighting the “three evils” of separatism, extremism and terrorism as well as transnational crime’. India, meanwhile, has regularly found itself the target of terrorists in Afghanistan, with its embassy in Kabul hit by suicide bombers in 2008 and 2009 and its consulate in Jalalabad attacked in 2013, while in 2010 two guesthouses in Kabul known to be popular with Indian doctors suffered suicide attacks; most recent was an attack in Herat on the Indian consulate in May 2014. A number of Indian nationals died in these incidents, which clearly deliberately targeted Indian interests, highlighting how the country finds itself in the particular crosshairs of the anti-state insurgency in Afghanistan. While China has been spared this level of direct attacks, on its citizens and its soil, the reality is that Chinese nationals also work under threat in the country and some have died in indiscriminate attacks. Consequently, the two countries clearly see the threat of terrorism in and from Afghanistan as a problem and co-operation in countering it would be a sensible next step. This mutual concern about terrorism has already been translated into practical action elsewhere, with China and India having already undertaken three rounds of ‘hand-in-hand’ bilateral training and counter-terrorism drills.

It is unlikely that China and India would be willing to deploy forces to Afghanistan in great strength in order to counter terrorist threats there (or to help stem the insurgency within the country), but working together to help develop an Afghan counter-terror force that is capable of dealing with the specific threats to their respective national interests offers a way to build on this bilateral co-operation in a regional framework. The existing bilateral

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channel for counter-terrorism training exercises could be used for this purpose; additionally, the multilateral Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could also play a greater role in Afghanistan. The country was finally brought into the organisation in 2012 when, under Chinese chairmanship, it was granted observer status. And although India is also still only an observer in the organisation, Indian diplomats have never hesitated to highlight the potential benefit of the SCO’s involvement in Afghanistan. In a speech at the heads of government meeting in Tashkent in December 2013, Indian Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh called for the SCO to have ‘a greater role’ in ‘rebuilding Afghanistan’. She went on to say that India has always believed that full-scale co-operation by the SCO could be vital in stabilising Afghanistan. Reflecting this, in February, President Xi told President Karzai that ‘China is also ready to push the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to play a bigger role on the Afghan issue’.

Past experience raises uncertainty about the practicality of these statements, given that the SCO has historically been relatively ineffective. However, the organisation does provide a useful forum in which members can negotiate over border disputes, and exchange information about terrorist groups and organised crime; it is also a mechanism for conducting joint training drills. These are all issues that China and India (as well as Afghanistan and most members of the SCO) see as common concerns, and which lie at the heart of potential Sino-Indian co-operation with regard to Afghanistan. The SCO could be more than a regular meeting place, instead acting as a centre for regional co-ordination on security measures to help stabilise Afghanistan. While this might generate concern among those SCO members who prefer to keep their relationship with Afghanistan on a bilateral level, such issues are mitigated by the fact that, currently, SCO activities are not compulsory. For example, China regularly undertakes bilateral military training exercises with individual SCO members, but the range of activities differs according to the nation involved. And finally, China and India could both be more active politically within the SCO to try to influence the organisation and the direction it takes with regard to Afghanistan – appointing senior, well-connected and effective diplomats to roles within the organisation, or as representatives at meetings. This would create the impetus from within that is required for the SCO to offer practical solutions to Afghanistan’s problems.

Economics

Encouraging security co-operation will help Afghanistan in the short term but, as already highlighted, the long-term foundation of a stable and prosperous nation is a thriving economy. This is also an area in which Chinese and Indian interests overlap. Both currently invest heavily in Afghanistan

15. Ibid.
16. People Daily, ‘Chinese, Afghan Presidents Agree to Promote Ties’.
in economic terms, through aid (with India the largest contributor in this regard), infrastructure projects and investment in the country’s fledgling mining industry. This trend is set to accelerate as the Chinese administration develops its ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’, which it is envisaged will comprise a vast network of transport arteries and trade routes between China’s western region of Xinjiang, Central and South Asia and, ultimately, Europe. India, meanwhile, launched its own ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy in 2012 that envisions Afghanistan as a regional trade hub, crossed by energy pipelines and air, rail and road links which it is hoped will one day link up with the subcontinent.

On the ground, Chinese state-owned firms Metallurgical Construction Corporation (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper have taken the lead in developing the Mes Aynak copper mine in Logar Province, while in the north, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has paired with the Watan Group (an Afghan exploration company) to develop the oil fields in the Afghan part of the Amu Darya basin. India has ventured more gingerly into Afghanistan’s mining sector, with SAIL AFISCO (the seven-company Afghan Iron and Steel Consortium, led by the Steel Authority of India) holding back on committing to the contract it won to exploit the Hajigak Iron ore mine while it waits for Afghanistan’s mining legislation to be passed. Meanwhile, the Chinese firms which have already invested in and started work on the projects in Amu Darya and Mes Aynak have increasingly found themselves facing problems on the ground – from security, to local governance, to an architectural site of great importance atop the Mes Aynak mine that required excavation and care. Atop all of this, Afghanistan has not yet passed the aforementioned mining legislation. Consequently, Chinese firms have sought to delay all further work until the political situation becomes clearer and the law is passed.

The problems China and India face in these cases are very similar. First, of course, there is the security situation. This can be resolved, in part, by some of the security measures highlighted above, in particular in the fostering of a specific ‘minerals security force’ that could draw on the substantial numbers of demobilised ANSF men and the retired 17,000-strong guard force that currently protects military supply convoys, international aid programmes and foreign installations. Both can provide a pool of trained, or semi-trained, men in the wake of the West’s drawdown in Afghanistan.

Yet the problems that the two countries face also include Afghanistan’s young and inefficient bureaucracy. While there are many smart Afghans who have returned home to help their country grow, it continues to suffer from the loss of skilled and educated citizens – a process that has been going on for decades – as educated or affluent Afghans build themselves routes out of the country. This problem is particularly prevalent in the white-collar class that provides the managers, technocrats and scientists who act as the motor for a modern economy. This is a community that China and India could take an active role in helping to develop again, offering scholarships for young Afghans to take courses at Chinese and Indian technical colleges, with a surety built into the programme that guarantees they spend at least three years working in Afghanistan having gained their qualifications.

A secondary problem that Chinese and Indian firms often encounter is local corruption, be this in terms of partners that fail to deliver having been paid or those that offer themselves as short-cuts through the system in exchange for money. As the two largest external investors in Afghanistan’s mining industry, China and India have an opportunity to establish some of the ground rules for the way in which business is conducted. Since India and China are also the biggest investors in Afghanistan and potential consumers of its resources and goods more broadly, both countries should discuss and seek to co-operate regarding their respective views of Afghanistan’s economic future. They should also work with Afghans to help them map out master plans for national development, urbanisation, five-year economic development, the establishment of stock markets, market-based rules and regulations, quarantine criteria and other practical economic structures. They could also highlight their respective support for Afghanistan’s economic development by holding, in turn, an annual Afghanistan Investment Forum. Furthermore, given that Chinese and Indian investment in Afghanistan is being led by state-owned enterprises, the governments in Beijing and New Delhi are in a position to ensure that those firms seeking to invest in Afghanistan adhere to some basic codes of conduct that prevent them from paying bribes or using corrupt methods to undercut competition. While both nations already have strong codes of conduct in place for their companies operating abroad, the reality is that in a country like Afghanistan, these measures can sometimes get lost in the difficult terrain. However, should Beijing and New Delhi establish strict rules for national firms that they have both agreed to, this would mean that two of Afghanistan’s largest prospective investors (and likely competitors in mineral-mining tenders) will be taking the same approach, which may help to reduce problems experienced with, and accusations of corruption relating to, larger mining concessions.

Yet Afghanistan’s economy will not thrive if it is dependent only on the mining and exportation of its natural wealth, given that the extractive industry is not very labour intensive. Instead, the overwhelming majority of Afghanistan’s
economy is built on agriculture and textiles. However, at the moment, poor infrastructure and unfair competition from neighbouring countries stifles the ability of Afghanistan’s farmers to profit from their work and encourages communities to grow opium, which is much more profitable, instead.

Greater Sino-Indian collaborative efforts could also be undertaken in infrastructure development in Afghanistan. Longer-term collaboration in this direction could see regional infrastructure being developed at a multilateral level, strengthening regional trade and co-operation between China, India and Afghanistan.

At a multinational level, China and India are already engaged in the many initiatives in the region driven by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB). These include: CAREC, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation partnership of ten countries, of which China and Afghanistan are two; CASA-1000, an electricity and trade project focused on Central and South Asia that is overseen by the World Bank; and the ADB-led TAPI project for the creation of a natural-gas pipeline linking Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The Heart of Asia process – an effort launched in 2011 in Istanbul aimed at getting Afghanistan’s regional neighbours to take on a greater role in the country’s future development – that is to be hosted in Tianjin, China this year, runs in parallel to the World Bank and ADB initiatives, and is aimed at reconnecting Afghanistan with its region. Even the SCO, which was founded on the principle of border security and counter-terrorism, has been looking into developing itself as a vehicle for regional co-operation regarding joint resource exploration, infrastructure projects and regional finance. China and India work alongside each other in all of these formats – but greater co-ordination of the two countries’ positions within these organisations and in relation to particular projects would improve the likelihood and effectiveness of implementation. Currently, there has been little progress in this regard – something that is likely due in part to uncertainty over Afghanistan’s future, but also to a lack of leadership. Given that the two Asian giants have both the wealth and companies to implement such ambitious infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, China and India should play a more forward role in driving them forward from rhetoric to action. This is something that would fundamentally be to both China and India’s full advantage, not only because of the positive effect these projects would have on Afghanistan’s stability, but also because they would help to secure Chinese and Indian access to the Afghanistan’s mineral wealth – something both countries need to support their domestic economic growth. It would also provide their large national companies with another area in which they can win major, lucrative infrastructure projects – projects that will help connect China and India to Middle Eastern markets and the opportunities inherent to these.
Politics
The third important pillar for a stable and prosperous Afghanistan in the longer term is political reconciliation. This is possibly the most difficult pillar of all three, partly because the current political process in Afghanistan is highly uncertain. It is difficult to know what impact the presence of NATO and Western forces in Afghan territory has on this process and to what extent their removal might change the political environment. Similarly, while President Hamid Karzai – who has built up considerable negative political capital abroad – currently dominates Afghan politics, what this landscape will look like following the change of government later this year is unclear, making it difficult to make any assured judgements about how political reconciliation process will unfold post 2014.

However, regardless of who is the president, some realities on the ground will not change. In particular, Pakistan’s fraught relationship with Afghanistan will continue to play a significant role in the country’s future and its political process. This is something that both China and India can help to address: China can continue to use its close relationship with Pakistan as a way of ensuring that Pakistani concerns and interests in Afghanistan are maintained, while the new government in India could reiterate that its relationship with Afghanistan is not being shaped in any way that is directed against Pakistan.

Ultimately, both Beijing and New Delhi believe that the reconciliation process should be Afghan-led. And while outside, and especially neighbouring, powers such as Pakistan undoubtedly have a role to play, they cannot maintain a veto over the process. Both China and India should help Afghanistan in facilitating this process to the greatest possible extent. Calling on their regional great-power status, China and India can use their joint influence to bring Afghanistan’s other border partners, such as Iran and Turkmenistan, into any political process.

Conclusions
Standing on the cusp of Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, China and India will soon find themselves called upon to help resolve the country’s problems. This may be because they will be seen as the only regional actors with the capacity to take effective action or perhaps because they are the countries that have the most to lose should the ongoing development of Afghanistan falter. Either way, both Asian powers need to start thinking now about what they can do to help Afghanistan in the future. Although this paper does not provide a comprehensive solution, it does offer a framework with practical ideas that decision-makers and policy actors in Beijing and New Delhi could use as the basis for their future interactions with, and in relation to, Afghanistan. Kabul has shown that its security capability is growing, but it has actively called for both China’s and India’s help in this difficult transition.
period; however, what has been missing so far are some considered ideas about what shape the co-operation between the two should take.

As the two largest and most prosperous ‘BRIC’ countries (in which grouping they are joined by Brazil and Russia), the question of what role China and India will play in the future world order is a question at the heart of current discussions about international relations and politics. In focusing on Afghanistan as a specific area for collaboration and co-operation, Beijing and New Delhi could build upon their current high-level discussions, offering a glimpse into what the future might look like and what the international community may expect from an increasingly Asian world order. They would also be directly helping a deeply troubled Afghanistan to finally come out from its long night.

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