



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE www.usip.org

SPECIAL REPORT

2301 Constitution Ave., NW • Washington, DC 20037 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

ABOUT THE REPORT

This Special Report contends that meaningful cooperation between the United States and China is needed to reinforce the viability of the Afghan government, reassure regional states of a long-term international commitment to Afghanistan, and advance a reconciliation process. This report originated as a discussion brief for a track II dialogue held in Beijing in December 2017, organized by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Before joining USIP as a senior adviser, David Rank spent twenty-seven years as a foreign service officer at the US Department of State. In addition to serving as deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires at the US Embassy in Beijing, he served at embassies in Afghanistan, Greece, and Mauritius. In Washington, he worked in the Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan and as the director of the Office of Afghanistan Affairs. In 2015 he received the State Department's Distinguished Honor Award.

David Rank

Leveraging US-China Cooperation to Build a Regional Consensus on Afghanistan

Summary

- US-China cooperation on Afghanistan has been far less ambitious than their shared interests would suggest is possible. Both countries share an interest in seeing an end to the Afghan conflict that incorporates the Taliban into Afghanistan's political system and prevents that country from becoming a safe haven for transnational terrorist groups.
- The Afghan political system, security forces, and economy remain weak. Without a significant shift in the prevailing situation, the accumulating political, economic, and security challenges Kabul faces could overwhelm the system.
- The modest increase in US troops in Afghanistan announced as part of President Trump's South Asia strategy may improve security in some areas, but is unlikely to fundamentally alter the situation in the country or significantly improve the prospects for ending the insurgency militarily.
- This reaffirms the importance of pursuing a political settlement to the conflict. The Taliban remain interested in at least exploring a negotiated settlement that ends the war in return for the withdrawal of all foreign troops as well as the (undefined) establishment of an Islamic order.
- In recognition of these factors, the United States and China should take concrete actions that demonstrate their commitment to a joint approach in Afghanistan, reinforce the viability of the Afghan government, reassure regional states of a long-term international commitment to Afghanistan and the region, and advance a reconciliation process.

© 2018 by the United States Institute of Peace.
All rights reserved.

SPECIAL REPORT 420

FEBRUARY 2018

CONTENTS

Interests Aligned, but Cooperation Limited	2
A Shaky Political, Security, and Economic Environment	2
Trump Administration Policy	4
Pressing Pakistan	5
Will Beijing Leverage Ties with Islamabad?	6
The Region Hedges Its Bets	6
Limits to Sino-US Cooperation	7
A Need for Ambition and a Sense of Urgency	8
An Action Plan	8

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent conflicts, promote postconflict peacebuilding, and increase conflict management tools, capacity, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in conflict zones around the globe.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Stephen J. Hadley (Chair), Principal, RiceHadleyGates, LLC, Washington, DC • **George E. Moose** (Vice Chair), Adjunct Professor of Practice, The George Washington University, Washington, DC • **Judy Ansley**, Former Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor under George W. Bush, Washington, DC • **Eric Edelman**, Hertog Distinguished Practitioner in Residence, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, DC • **Joseph Eldridge**, University Chaplain and Senior Adjunct Professorial Lecturer, School of International Service, American University, Washington, DC • **Kerry Kennedy**, President, Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, Washington, DC • **Ikram U. Khan**, President, Quality Care Consultants, LLC., Las Vegas, NV • **Stephen D. Krasner**, Graham H. Stuart Professor of International Relations at Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA • **John A. Lancaster**, Former Executive Director, International Council on Independent Living, Potsdam, NY • **Jeremy A. Rabkin**, Professor of Law, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA • **J. Robinson West**, Chairman, PFC Energy, Washington, DC • **Nancy Zirkin**, Executive Vice President, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, Washington, DC

MEMBERS EX OFFICIO

Rex Tillerson, Secretary of State • **James Mattis**, Secretary of Defense • **Frederick J. Roegge**, Vice Admiral, US Navy; President, National Defense University • **Nancy Lindborg**, President, United States Institute of Peace (nonvoting)

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

To request permission to photocopy or reprint materials, email: permissions@usip.org.

Interests Aligned, but Cooperation Limited

The US and Chinese governments recognize their shared interest in a stable, peaceful, and increasingly prosperous (or, at least, increasingly self-sufficient) Afghanistan. Perhaps most clearly, for the United States, achieving a stable outcome in Afghanistan would allow it to end its long, costly military involvement there; but China too would benefit enormously from reduced instability on its border. Both countries also realize that this outcome is far from a given and that the stakes are high. The failure of the Afghan state, and the increase in extremist violence that would follow, would be extremely damaging to both American and Chinese interests. To the extent President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road initiative in Central Asia is successful and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor takes shape, instability in the region will be able to spread even more quickly to China's west.

Despite this alignment of interests, concrete US-China cooperation on Afghanistan has been notable primarily for its limited ambition. While worthwhile, initiatives such as the joint training of Afghan diplomats, health workers, and agricultural specialists do little more than suggest a willingness to cooperate. Increasingly, given the largely symbolic nature of these programs, they also unintentionally serve to highlight the dearth of more fundamental Sino-US cooperation on Afghan issues. Public statements from both parties at recent international gatherings have expressed an interest in cooperation but have yet to translate into demonstrable joint or tightly coordinated action.

Given the implausibility of quelling the insurgency militarily in the foreseeable future, the United States and China should move quickly and in a coordinated fashion to improve the prospects for a political reconciliation. Central to this should be an effort to promote a political settlement between the Taliban and Afghan government that stabilizes the country, contains terrorist threats in and near it, and allows most if not all foreign troops to leave Afghan territory. Engagement with other states in the region would be an important part of such an effort, and the complementary influence that Beijing and Washington have with those actors would be amplified if it is clear that China and the United States are working together.

A Shaky Political, Security, and Economic Environment

Established in the wake of a months-long postelectoral impasse in 2014, Afghanistan's National Unity Government has proven more durable than many observers originally expected. However, although the government has made encouraging progress—particularly in recent months—in appointments and judicial and other reforms, the governance challenges Afghanistan faces remain extraordinary. The political, economic, and security threats the country faces—exacerbated by the underlying tensions between President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, and the groups they represent—will be pushed increasingly to the fore as political and new electoral deadlines approach.

At the political level, the unity government has failed at its major task—resolving the conflict over opposing visions of the relationship of the Afghan state to society held by political elites with origins in the main ethnic and tribal groups.¹ As a result, the stage is set for another political crisis, which is likely to come no later than the presidential election scheduled for 2019. At an operational level, the unity government has done little to prepare for elections or the Constitutional Loya Jirga envisioned in the power-sharing agreement that established the uneasy partnership of Ghani and Abdullah. There is good reason to worry that the technical problems that contributed to the postelection political crisis in 2014 will not be corrected. A revamped (and inexperienced) Independent Electoral Commission is pressing ahead with preparations for parliamentary and district council elections

scheduled to occur in July 2018, with the ambitious goal of creating polling station-specific voter lists ahead of that vote.²

Economically, the country is still a long way from implementing existing plans for greater self-sufficiency and replacing the (now greatly reduced) international presence that has been the principal driver of growth since 2001. The good news is that government revenue collection has increased over the past two years.³ Indeed, in 2016, collections exceeded projections by 5 percent. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth has been less encouraging, coming in well below the population growth rate in each of the last two years. A somber World Bank assessment suggests that GDP growth will exceed population growth (that is, per capita GDP will increase) only in 2019.⁴

Even this projection, however, is based on the assumption that the security and political situation will remain stable, which is far from given. In his September 15, 2017, report to the UN Security Council, Secretary-General António Guterres succinctly captured the state of the insurgency: “The conflict continued unabated throughout the country.”⁵ The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) have prevented the Taliban from taking and holding major population centers, but this low standard of success only serves to highlight the extent of the challenge facing Afghan forces. Kabul is in little danger of falling from without, but high-profile attacks remain a constant danger. This is particularly true as Taliban units slowly consolidate control of rural terrain near enough to the city to use as a staging area (which is also making access to Pakistani safe havens gradually less crucial). Groups affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) also pose a continued threat, despite being under concerted US pressure.

NATO has made efforts to develop the ANDSF a central element of its strategy toward Afghanistan. Although China began providing Afghanistan with limited military assistance in 2016 (persistent reports suggest there are small numbers of Chinese military personnel operating in Afghanistan), policy and legal considerations have hampered any concrete cooperation with the NATO effort.⁶ In an effort to reclaim the initiative from the Taliban, President Ghani directed the ANDSF to work with the NATO-led Resolute Support mission to develop a plan to ensure that the government controls territory holding at least 80 percent of the Afghan population by 2020.⁷ Observers differ widely on whether this is an attainable goal given the Taliban’s strength across most of Afghanistan’s countryside, even in light of the modest troop increase and loosened combat authorities under the Trump administration’s declared strategy. Many also question whether the Afghan government has the luxury of time; Afghanistan’s 2018 parliamentary elections and 2019 presidential election, along with the 2018 midterm elections in the United States, are likely to create pressure for signs of significant progress.

The Taliban appear to be adapting their tactics in response to greater use of US air power (by shifting to high-profile attacks rather than seeking to overrun population centers) but show no sign of cracking. Thus, the Afghan government’s strategy of seeking to convince the Taliban of the need to pursue a negotiated settlement is, at best, a long-term proposition. The Taliban remain viscerally opposed to direct dialogue with what they consider a puppet regime in Kabul, preferring instead to negotiate with the United States and other powers over the removal of international troops. (The Afghan government often takes a reciprocal view of the Taliban, viewing the group as a mere puppet of Pakistan and hoping to reach peace by talking to Islamabad.) A key challenge in any peace process will be squaring these competing views on the proper makeup of the negotiating table and sequencing of talks, as each side seeks to frame the conflict and potential dialogue in such a way as to strengthen its legitimacy.

The Taliban remain viscerally opposed to direct dialogue with what they consider a puppet regime in Kabul, preferring instead to negotiate with the United States and other powers over the removal of international troops.

Meanwhile, a new generation of Taliban and IS-affiliated fighters is emerging—one that came of age in an era of conflict with NATO forces and the insurgency's brutal use of attacks on civilians in pursuit of its goals. These militants are most likely less amenable than their elders to the idea of negotiated integration into the Afghan political structure. Although the December 2016 peace agreement with Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) offered encouragement to proponents of a talk-and-fight strategy and demonstrated that the Afghan government could competently manage a peace negotiation, HIG's near total atrophy as a fighting force means that process offers little parallel to the challenge of reconciling the Taliban. The Taliban, who enjoy robust international backing and ascendant control of rural territory and population in Afghanistan, almost certainly would expect far greater concessions from the Afghan government than what HIG received.

Trump Administration Policy

On August 21, 2017, President Donald Trump unveiled his Afghanistan strategy as part of a broader regional approach. His remarks made clear that decisions on the American (and, by extension, NATO) troop presence would be based on conditions rather than “arbitrary timelines.” At the same time, Trump disavowed nation building, stating that the focus of the US military presence going forward would be killing terrorists. To that end, the president announced a relaxation of the rules of engagement under which US forces in Afghanistan had been operating—rules that, he said, had prevented US troops from “fully and swiftly waging battle against the enemy.” Trump emphasized his commitment to bring “decisive and overwhelming force” in pursuit of victory, which he defined as “attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing al-Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan, and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge.”⁸

Likely in response to the apparently open-ended nature of these objectives, on August 25, National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster attempted to clarify the president's words:

“Winning in Afghanistan is really aimed at allowing Afghanistan to be Afghanistan. As the President said, not to nation-build, not to create a state in U.S. image. Winning in Afghanistan means that there are not terrorist groups who are able to control key parts of the territory and population centers there that could be used to mobilize resources, raise funds, use those funds to then organize, plan, and conduct acts against us and our allies and partners.”⁹

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has been the most vocal advocate for the “talk” side of the administration's “fight and talk” strategy. During his October 23 visit to Afghanistan, Tillerson reiterated the possibility of a place in the government for elements of the Taliban that renounce terrorism and violence and commit to a stable, prosperous Afghanistan.¹⁰

Meeting President Trump's goal of “winning” in Afghanistan—however defined precisely—will be a challenge, given the extent of Taliban and IS presence in the country and the limited additional resources his military planners are seeking. Responding to a request from the top US and NATO commander in Afghanistan, Army General John Nicholson, the United States has deployed roughly four thousand additional troops in recent months, primarily to aid in the train, advise, and assist mission. These forces will join the roughly eleven thousand American troops and five thousand personnel from NATO and other coalition partners already deployed, plus an expected increase in other coalition troop contributions.¹¹ Nevertheless, in sum this represents only a fraction of the total international military presence at the height of the 2009–11 “surge” that failed to defeat the Taliban. The question is often raised how an international force that is a fraction of what it was at the height of the surge will achieve better results, particularly given the increased territory the Taliban now hold. The most frequent responses to this question—that the additional forces will make an improved

Meeting President Trump's goal of “winning” in Afghanistan—however defined precisely—will be a challenge, given the extent of Taliban and IS presence in the country and the limited additional resources his military planners are seeking.

ANDSF even more effective and that an unlimited troop timeline will have a critical psychological effect on the Taliban—would seem to be inadequate or, at best, premature.

Pressing Pakistan

Proponents of the new US strategy also point to the increased focus on incentivizing Islamabad to shift its strategic posture toward Afghanistan, stressing that eliminating safe havens for the Taliban would give the ANDSF an upper hand on the battlefield. While previous administrations had identified Pakistan as the key to long-term stability in Afghanistan and complained about Pakistani tolerance of and support for extremist groups, Trump was characteristically blunt. The president called out Islamabad in his first tweet of 2018, accusing Pakistan of giving the United States “nothing but lies & deceit” and hinting that US assistance might be curtailed.¹²

Other senior US officials have similarly suggested that the United States might use “more punitive, more disruptive, persuasive” measures if Islamabad fails to act on American concerns. High on Washington’s agenda is the long-standing presence of the Haqqani network leadership on Pakistani soil. Echoing George W. Bush’s post-9/11 warning that Islamabad needed to choose sides—cooperate with the United States or become a target—one senior administration figure observed that Pakistan “has a lot to gain” by working with the United States and “a lot to lose if it fails to take adequate steps.”¹³ Secretary Tillerson was equally direct during his October 24 visit to Islamabad, stressing that “Pakistan must increase its efforts to eradicate militants and terrorists operating within the country.”¹⁴ Washington shifted from rhetoric to action in early 2018, announcing the suspension of nearly all military assistance to Pakistan—hundreds of millions of dollars in Coalition Support Funds and Foreign Military Financing—until it sees progress on issues of concern, most notably safe havens for the Taliban and the Haqqani network.¹⁵

Islamabad likely assesses that it can manage a suspension in US aid, given the US need of Pakistani cooperation to supply American forces in Afghanistan and the growing importance of Chinese economic assistance to its “all-weather partner.” (Indeed, immediately following Trump’s tweet, a spokesperson for China’s foreign ministry came to Islamabad’s defense, and Pakistan’s central bank announced that the renminbi could be used in trade between the two countries instead of the dollar.) Likely more unsettling to Pakistan’s leaders was Trump’s push—in the context of a broader, if still largely undefined, regional strategy—for an enhanced US-India strategic partnership and a greater Indian role in Afghanistan. In remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington on October 18, Secretary of State Tillerson underscored the extent of this vision, calling the United States and India “increasingly global partners, with growing strategic convergence.” The countries “don’t just share an affinity for democracy; we share a vision of the future,” Tillerson stressed.¹⁶ Part of this shared vision includes a common view of Pakistan. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Washington in June 2017 culminated in an unprecedented summit-level call on Pakistan to “ensure that its territory is not used to launch terrorist attacks on other countries.”¹⁷

This willingness to press Pakistan may have helped secure Islamabad’s cooperation in the rescue of Caitlan Coleman and her family, who had been held captive for five years by the Haqqani network. A hostage recovery, however, is not the same as a shift in long-held Pakistani policy toward Afghanistan, and a strategy of concerted pressure on Pakistan carries risks for the United States. First, Pakistan’s cooperation will be needed for more strategic goals like securing an Afghan peace process; heated rhetoric could make Islamabad less likely to cooperate. Second, isolating Pakistan could create a nuclear-armed state hostile to US interests (including supplying US operations in Afghanistan) and which could destabilize Afghanistan or spoil a peace process. Third, the experience in the 1990s of the Pressler Amendment, which put

severe restrictions on US assistance in response to Pakistan's nuclear program, demonstrated that a period of serious estrangement can engender ill will in Pakistan for decades, with consequences that are hard to predict in the present.

Will Beijing Leverage Ties with Islamabad?

Washington recognizes that, to be successful, any South Asia strategy must take into account China and the long-standing Sino-Pakistani relationship. The Trump administration's tilt toward India comes as the already strong Beijing-Islamabad partnership deepens further, most notably in the economic, investment, and commercial arenas. By multiple measures, China's economic influence over Pakistan is growing rapidly. In addition to tens of billions of pledged investment under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative, China's trade with Pakistan is growing quickly (now far outstripping bilateral trade between the United States and Pakistan), and Chinese loans have been critical in helping the Pakistani government cover its current account deficit.

The United States has long encouraged Beijing to use its influence to move Islamabad toward greater support for Afghan stability and action against militant groups. Chinese officials have long protected Pakistan from criticism in international forums, using China's position on the UN Security Council to prevent sanctioning of certain Pakistan-based transnational militants and groups. In this light, the Pakistani establishment was disturbed to read the Xiamen Declaration, issued on September 4, 2017, at the end of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) summit held in that Chinese city. The document called out violence committed by a list of organizations, including two groups based in Pakistan: Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. Presumably because the declaration also named the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which Beijing accuses of inspiring extremist violence in its western border regions, the Xiamen Declaration sent an undeniable message that Beijing has priorities beyond simply maintaining ties with its all-weather friend.

Several factors contribute to China's willingness to risk offending its traditional partner. Beijing has genuine concerns about instability in South Asia spilling over into western China. Furthermore, the success of the Central Asian element of President Xi's Belt and Road initiative requires a level of stability and security in Afghanistan, as well as more serious steps to contain groups taking shelter in Pakistan that threaten other parts of Central Asia. The simple fact that Pakistan has few other options is also significant. Ultimately, however, with the US-Pakistan relationship likely to be fraught at best under the Trump administration, Beijing knows that Islamabad cannot afford to protest loudly enough to jeopardize its ties with its closest partner in the region. Likewise, Pakistan's leadership has doubtlessly assessed the importance of ensuring that the fundamentals of their ties with Beijing are sound, given the growing Washington-New Delhi partnership.

A December 2017 meeting of the Chinese, Pakistani, and Afghan foreign ministers pre-viewed one area in which Beijing may be willing and able to leverage its ties with Islamabad to influence events in Afghanistan. The three ministers announced their intention to extend CPEC to Afghanistan, with the Chinese foreign ministry clarifying that any expansion of CPEC would "proceed in incremental steps" and begin with "easy and small projects."¹⁸

The Region Hedges Its Bets

As regional powers have lost confidence in the US strategy in Afghanistan and increasingly view the US presence as a potential threat rather than a force for stability, the regional

consensus in support of the Afghan state that emerged from the 2001 Bonn Conference has frayed badly. Instead of cooperating to ensure the success of the government in Kabul, Afghanistan's neighbors now appear to take seriously the possibility that the current Afghan state will fail. As a result, they are hedging their bets by backing traditional (and some less traditional) partners. Some in the region also view the instability of Afghanistan through the lens of their relations with the United States, seeing it as an opportunity to drain US resources and damage US interests and prestige. These trends further weaken the Afghan government, increase instability, and encourage others to hedge, creating the possibility of a vicious, downward cycle.

Iran has an abiding interest in Afghanistan's future. The two countries share a nearly thousand-kilometer border, and instability in Afghanistan facilitates the flow of drugs, migrants, and militants across it. Nevertheless, reports that Tehran has deepened support for the (predominantly Sunni) Taliban suggest that Iran has lost confidence in the Afghan government it helped bring to power in 2001. Moreover, Tehran's leaders probably also assess that a weakened Afghan state will make it less likely that the Trump administration could use American military facilities in Afghanistan to target Iran.

Russia appears to be engaged in similarly unhelpful behavior. Certainly, the US government is deeply suspicious of Moscow's motives. American officials have accused Russia of arming the Taliban. Likewise, Washington has offered uncharitable assessments of Moscow's motives in organizing a regional dialogue on Afghanistan without consulting Washington, with a State Department spokesperson describing the conference as a "unilateral Russian attempt to assert influence in the region."¹⁹ Clearly, Russia shares Iran's concerns about drugs and militants in its backyard, as well as about a permanent military presence in Afghanistan. Maintaining an independent ability to influence the situation in Afghanistan not only gives Moscow some leverage on these issues, it also has the potential to provide leverage in discussions with Washington on topics like Ukraine, Syria, and other aspects of that difficult relationship.

Limits to Sino-US Cooperation

China is decidedly ambivalent about a large US military presence on its far western border, caught between concerns that the Americans will leave too quickly, allowing the country and region to slip deeper into instability, and that they will stay too long, as a way to "contain" China or interfere with its projection of power to its west. While the American public has voiced little opposition to the nearly two-decade involvement in Afghanistan, there is clearly little enthusiasm for a long-term military presence there. Indeed, an August 2017 Politico/Morning Consult survey showed that nearly one-third (32 percent) of those polled said the United States should withdraw immediately, regardless of the impact it would have on the US ability to target al-Qaeda, IS, and other terrorists.²⁰ Fewer than one-quarter of respondents believed that the United States was winning in Afghanistan.²¹

Beijing's most important contribution, in the eyes of Washington (and Kabul), would be to use its influence with Pakistan to close off Taliban safe havens and thereby increase the pressure on the movement to negotiate an end to the war. Beijing did invest significant capital to advance the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), which produced several meetings among the United States, China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, as well as a meeting in Murree, Pakistan, between an Afghan government delegation and a subset of the Taliban movement. Although the QCG reportedly met in October 2017 in Muscat, it has been largely moribund since May 2016, when then-Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour was killed by a US drone strike in Pakistan.

In principle, the two countries share an interest in spurring economic development in Afghanistan. A more vigorous Afghan economy would provide jobs to ordinary Afghans and alternatives to violence for insurgents and greater legitimacy for the government, and it would reduce the country's reliance on outside assistance. Commodity prices have dropped significantly since a much-touted (and, even then, hotly debated) trillion dollar estimate of the country's mineral resources was issued in 2010, and the security and transportation challenges to getting these resources to market will remain daunting.²² Still, any long-term development strategy would need to take advantage of the extraordinary potential in Afghanistan's extractive industries. The Mes Aynak project—a \$3 billion deal signed a decade ago between Chinese firms and the Afghan government but which has yet to produce ore—illustrates some of the challenges the mining sector faces. Also challenging would be the (relatively happy) question of who, aside from the Afghans themselves, would benefit most from growth in the extractives sector—the United States or China (not to mention Iran, through which much of the products of Afghan mines would flow).²³

A Need for Ambition and a Sense of Urgency

As the United States and China again explore deeper cooperation under the Trump administration's Afghanistan strategy, the most important questions are whether China can turn its relationship with Pakistan into leverage to advance an Afghan peace process, whether the United States can do likewise with its relationship with Afghanistan, and whether both China and the United States can deliver a synchronized, impactful message to the Taliban (as well as to the Afghan government) that increases their interest in a negotiated peace.

The past sixteen years have shown that half measures are of little use in Afghanistan. Sino-US cooperation of the types that have occurred to date has made for good talking points on the margins of summit meetings, but it cannot be expected to have a significant impact on Afghanistan's trajectory. Accomplishing that will require courage and commitment, and comes with no guarantee of success. It will require China to leverage fully its established relationship with Pakistan to address insecurity in Afghanistan and to act as the great power it aspires to be. It will require, for example, that American officials and political leaders accept that a successful outcome is likely to result in Chinese enterprises playing a major role in Afghanistan's extractive industries. It will require both sides to take a forward-looking approach to the problem rather than focusing on past actions, and to insulate cooperation in the region from other, inevitable irritants in their complex relationship.

The past sixteen years have shown that half measures are of little use in Afghanistan. Sino-US cooperation...to date has made for good talking points on the margins of summit meetings, but it cannot be expected to have a significant impact on Afghanistan's trajectory.

An Action Plan

As a first step, the two countries should articulate a shared vision for the future of Afghanistan. This would send a strong signal to parties within Afghanistan and to the region that the two most powerful outside actors are united on key questions. Specifically, they should express support for an Afghanistan that is politically stable and has a government that represents all major elements of society, enjoys international legitimacy and is on good terms with all its neighbors, is increasingly economically self-sufficient and integrated into regional and global markets, and provides for its own security and ensures that no party can use Afghan territory to threaten others.

In concert with this, the two countries should develop parallel strategies to press the Afghan and Pakistani governments to induce and pressure (respectively) the Taliban to join a peace dialogue. Part of this strategy should be a joint plan to reduce the flow of militants in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas. This might include the stationing of Chinese liaison

personnel in areas of particular security concern in Pakistan, which would send a clear signal that Beijing has “skin in the game.” Another concrete way to demonstrate a sense of joint commitment and purpose would be to find ways to coordinate Chinese military personnel and matériel in aspects of the effort to train and equip the ANDSF.

At the same time, the two countries should work with the Afghan government to produce an opening “offer” to the Taliban. The goal would be to induce further discussion by laying out (for example) what political position, social reforms, constitutional guarantees, and rights for imprisoned and demobilized insurgent fighters the Taliban could expect under a peace agreement. In addition, they could put forward a joint reconciliation plan, including possible monitoring mechanisms, to be presented to the Afghan government and Taliban representatives, potentially at a QCG meeting. All of this should be accompanied by firm, coordinated messages to the Taliban, making clear that China and the United States will never deal with the Taliban as a legitimate authority except through a peaceful political negotiation. The two countries should also encourage regional states and other interested parties to take similar positions.

In support of the above measures, the United States and China should jointly develop a plan to secure regional endorsements for, and concrete contributions to, an Afghan peace process and post-reconciliation government. Given their relative influence with different countries in the region (particularly China with Pakistan and Iran, and the United States with India), it would make sense to divide responsibility for securing specific commitments from those countries.

Finally, China and the United States need to send a signal that they understand the need for long-term international support for Afghanistan and for efforts to increase the country’s ability to provide for its own needs. To signal their shared commitment to the success of the Afghan state, the two countries should agree to provide equal levels of on-budget civilian assistance based on transparent, agreed mechanisms. This would require China to increase significantly its current assistance to Afghanistan (and result in a corresponding decrease in US assistance, given limitations on Afghanistan’s absorptive capacity), but the sums in question are relatively small relative to its expenditures on the CPEC and Belt and Road initiatives. The two countries should also make clear their commitment to work jointly with each other and the Afghan government to support private-sector development. As a first step, given the importance of extractives to Afghanistan’s long-term sustainability, they should begin a dialogue with the Afghan government—possibly joined by outside entities such as the Asian Development Bank or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and drawing on global standards such as those promoted by the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative—on “rules of the road” for future foreign participation in that sector.

Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of Afghanistan’s political situation and prospects, see Alex Thier and Scott Worden, “Political Stability in Afghanistan: A 2020 Vision and Roadmap,” Special Report 408 (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, July 2017), www.usip.org/publications/2017/07/political-stability-afghanistan-2020-vision-and-roadmap; Barnett R. Rubin and Georgette Gagnon, “The U.S. Presence and Afghanistan’s National Unity Government: Preserving and Broadening the Political Settlement” (New York: NYU Center on International Cooperation, August 2016), <http://cic.nyu.edu/publications/us-presence-and-afghanistan-national-unity-government-preserving-and-broadening>.
2. Of course, creating station-specific voter lists is made much more challenging by the fact that the Taliban controls many of the country’s districts. Tadamichi Yamamoto, head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, offered a relatively optimistic assessment of the preparations for next summer’s vote in his September 2017 briefing to the UN Security Council, but even that document underscores that the Afghan political system likely cannot endure another 2014-style political crisis. See SRSG Briefing to the Security Council, “Briefing to the United Nations Security Council by the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan, Mr. Tadamichi Yamamoto,” September 25, 2017, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/25_sept_2017_srsrg_briefing_security_council_english_1.pdf.
3. For more details, see William Byrd and M. Khalid Payenda, “Revenue Growth in Afghanistan Continues Strong but Future Uncertain,” Peace Brief 219 (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, February 2017), www.usip.org/publications/2017/02/revenue-growth-afghanistan-continues-strong-future-uncertain.

4. World Bank, "The World Bank in Afghanistan: Overview," October 17, 2017, www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview.
5. UN Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security: Report of the Secretary-General," September 21, 2017, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg_report_on_afghanistan_21_sept_2017.pdf.
6. See, for example, Franz J. Marty, "The curious case of Chinese troops on Afghan soil," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 3, 2017, www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13424-the-curious-case-of-chinese-troops-on-afghan-soil.html.
7. In February 2017, the US Department of Defense estimated that the Afghan government maintained "control or influence" over territory with approximately 65 percent of Afghanistan's population. The same report estimated that the Taliban held sway over 11 percent of the country's population. See US Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan: Report to Congress," June 2017, www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/June_2017_1225_Report_to_Congress.pdf.
8. White House, "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia," August 21, 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/21/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-and-south-asia.
9. White House, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Sarah Sanders, et al.," August 25, 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-briefing-press-secretary-sarah-sanders-et-al-082517/.
10. US Department of State, "Press Availability at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan," October 23, 2017, www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/10/275003.htm.
11. US Secretary of Defense James Mattis illustrated the difficulties that can arise from using metrics like troop numbers in making policy decisions when, in August 2017, he revised upward the figure for uniformed military personnel then in Afghanistan. Although President Obama had approved a "force management level" of 8,400, the actual number of troops at any one time was actually several thousand more, counting troops on short-term assignments and other special cases. Critics also complained that the Obama administration's focus on numbers led to greater reliance on security contractors, whose numbers did not count against the limit on uniformed personnel.
12. Daniella Diaz, "Trump's first 2018 tweet: Pakistan has 'given us nothing but lies & deceit'," *CNN*, January 2, 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/01/01/politics/donald-trump-2018-pakistan/index.html.
13. US Institute of Peace, "Troops, Reforms, Regional Role Define Afghanistan Plan: U.S. Officials Brief at USIP to Fill in Details of Trump Announcement," August 23, 2017, www.usip.org/publications/2017/08/troops-reforms-regional-role-define-afghanistan-plan.
14. US Embassy & Consulates in Pakistan, "Secretary of State Rex Tillerson Visit to Pakistan," October 24, 2017, <https://pk.usembassy.gov/secretary-state-rex-tillerson-visit-pakistan/>.
15. US Department of State, "Background Briefing with Senior State Department Officials on Security Assistance to Pakistan," January 4, 2018, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/01/276858.htm.
16. Center for Strategic & International Studies, "Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson," October 18, 2017, www.csis.org/events/defining-our-relationship-india-next-century-address-us-secretary-state-rex-tillerson.
17. White House, "United States and India: Prosperity Through Partnership," June 26, 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/26/united-states-and-india-prosperity-through-partnership.
18. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference," December 27, 2017, www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1522467.shtml.
19. US Department of State, "Department Press Briefing," April 13, 2017, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2017/04/270147.htm.
20. Steven Shepard, "Trump's challenge: A wall of public skepticism on Afghanistan war," *Politico*, August 21, 2017, www.politico.com/story/2017/08/21/trump-afghanistan-war-troops-241871.
21. Politico/Morning Consult, "National Tracking Poll 170803," August 3-6, 2017, www.politico.com/f/?id=0000015d-c4ac-dd39-a75d-cfbfc3e0002.
22. See Chin S. Kuo, "The Mineral Industry of Afghanistan," in *2010 Minerals Yearbook: Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: USGS, August 2012), <https://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2010/myb3-2010-af.pdf>.
23. On July 25, 2017, the *New York Times* reported President Trump's determination "not to spend American lives and treasure only to watch China lock up its rare-earth deposits." See Mark Landler and James Risen, "Trump Finds Reason for the U.S. to Remain in Afghanistan: Minerals," *New York Times*, July 25, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/world/asia/afghanistan-trump-mineral-deposits.html.

ISBN: 978-1-60127-705-3

An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

Of Related Interest

- *USAID in Afghanistan: Challenges and Successes* by William Hammink (Special Report, December 2017)
- *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Barriers and Impact* by Arif Rafiq (Peaceworks, October 2017)
- *Rule of Law, Governance, and Human Rights in Afghanistan, 2002 to 2016* by Erin Houlihan and William Spencer (Peaceworks, September 2017)
- *Afghan Views of Government and Elections: Legitimacy Pending* by Anna Larson and Noah Coburn (Special Report, July 2017)
- *Political Stability in Afghanistan: A 2020 Vision and Roadmap* by Alex Thier and Scott Worden (Special Report, July 2017)



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

2301 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20037
www.usip.org



@usip