

AN ENQUIRY STUDY OF CHINA–NATO COOPERATION AFTER AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

What has US policy towards Afghanistan achieved since the US-led coalition launched an invasion of the landlocked Islamic country one decade ago? What might have been done differently if NATO and China had cooperated with each other after the United States troops withdrew from the war-worn land? What does a cooperative security regime between China and NATO offer to other countries like the U.S., Russia, India and Pakistan once China agrees to take the norm of R2P in its neighbor neighborhood? This article explores the underlying reasons why and how good relations between China and NATO might enhance cooperative security and contribute to a peaceful transition in Afghanistan. Taking into account the question raised above, this paper argues that China's strategic depth should be secured to include Central Asia, the Middle East, Russia and East-Central Europe. Therefore, it is necessary for China to work closely with the international community in order to assist Afghanistan in the war against all sorts of terrorism and to make regional peace, to preserve its stability and to promote cooperation with all countries involved.

Keywords:

China; NATO; Afghanistan; U.S.; cooperative security regime.

China's strategic ties with NATO were not addressed prior to the 21st century. This is quite understandable because they were anchored into hostile camps from the onset and the PRC and NATO were both founded in 1949. Two decades later, all member states of NATO came to recognize Beijing as the legitimate regime of China, yet there was no strategic cooperation between China and NATO. Relations between NATO member states, are and remain to this day "essential and unique" and this is the basis of Europe's Common Security and Foreign Policy¹. Due to this, it is necessary to explore the changes of their perceptions since the Cold War and in particular how the political elites from NATO countries and China think of their cooperation after US

withdrawal from Afghanistan. The article argues for a working relationship that should be forged between NATO and China in order to enhance any peaceful transition in the war-worn land, as the former is the largest alliance in the world and the latter is the largest emerging power and also a neighbor of Afghanistan. The question that needs to be addressed is: what results would come out if China and NATO work together; and for what reasons do they need to work with each other considering the uncertain trends of the world order. To that end, the first step is to make a review of how NATO and China have reciprocally become closer during the last few decades.

The year of 1949 was the gloomy heyday of the Cold War, when China started a new chap-

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¹Roland Vogt, "Limitations for Europe's Partnership with China" in Roland Vogt's (ed.), *China and Europe: Strategic Partners or Rivals*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012, p. 69.

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ter in its modern history and Russia (USSR) made its *debut* atomic test. As a result, NATO was immediately established since it was urgent for the West to secure the transatlantic alliance. Unexpectedly, it was China that became the first communist power to fight directly against NATO member states such as the United States, Britain, Turkey and etc. However, what made the war inevitable was the dilemma that both North and South Korea were anxious to change by force the status quo on the peninsula, which actually went against China's initial security priorities. From that time, there was no normal dialogue between China and NATO for two decades until the 1970s. Later, Henry Kissinger remarked that China had to manage a stalemate with the United States and its allies through a combination of military and diplomatic maneuvers².

Following the Sino-America *rapprochement* in 1972, the exchange of ambassadors between China and the EU (then EEC) actually brought China to having ever closer contacts with all the member states of NATO. More than that, the tension between China and the USSR in the 1970s turned China into an advocate of NATO, which was seen by China as counterbalance to the Soviet Union. The decade from 1975 to 1989 was regarded an epoch of mutual trust and frank cooperation, as it involved occasional military exchanges and security consultations between the two sides. Although these military exchanges were more symbolic than substantial, given its strongest anti-Soviet rhetoric, China was labeled as the "sixteenth member of NATO" throughout the 1970s³.

Yet this cooperation came to an end in 1989 when social-political turmoil erupted in China and with the collapse of the Soviet bloc soon afterwards. NATO member states favored the arms embargo against China, and formal dialogues between Beijing and Brussels nearly

ceased. The mutual distrust on both sides continued until 1999 when China's embassy in Belgrade was bombed deliberately by the US air force⁴. Yet, this time the headquarters of NATO came out to make an open apology to Beijing, even though it was seen primarily as a diplomatic token.

The review of the vicissitudes between China and NATO serves to highlight that NATO's external relationship has been frequently affected by security issues and the leverage of the United States as well. Dilemmas were so common that it became important to move on and find an opportunity to work for the common interests of China and some NATO member states in world affairs. As a matter of fact, a Common Position is not unusual in view of NATO or EU security and foreign policy.

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The "September 11 attack" came suddenly as a crisis and an occasion as well for countries like the United States and China, because Beijing had managed to put an end to the isolation imposed by Washington and its allies since 1989. Yet, the invasion of Afghanistan was led by the United States from the very beginning, and NATO allies never sought Beijing's opinion when they deployed the troops near China's soft security zone (Xinjiang Uygur region). Despite this, the leaders in Beijing instead reiterated that it is the common mission for all states to fight against terrorism whenever necessary. Now it seems to justify an ancient wisdom that "He laughs best who laughs last." The U.S.-led War against Afghanistan did not go well as expected, but China's power grew steadily and remarkably. The turning point finally came in March 2010 when Anders F. Rasmussen NATO Secretary-General frankly said, "I do not consider China as a threat; I think we should develop a partnership with

²Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 491.

³David Shambaugh, *China and Europe: 1949–1995*, Contemporary China Institute Research Notes & Studies, 1996, p. 12. Also see Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), p. 373. It said that since 1979, the United States would not interfere in the decision by NATO allies to sell "arms" to China.

⁴Tom Bowman, "NATO Apologizes to China", *The Baltimore Sun*, May 9th, 1999, accessed April 6th, 2015, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1999-05-09/news/9905090005_1_chinese-embassy-nato-embassy-bombing

the aim to solve problems like the one in Afghanistan ... The first step could be to organize a political dialogue on a regular basis”⁵. Significantly, it was a signal to China that it would be invited to play a constructive role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan once the ceasefire began. But military campaigns alone have been proven inefficient and not constructive enough to tackle the issues in Afghanistan. Also the historical lessons from Afghanistan, also called the “graveyard of empires” were unexpected and fears of failure appeared unfounded at the beginning of the operation to Washington and its allies.

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan has left many loopholes like the insecurity of the government in Kabul and reemergence of Taliban groups in the country, let alone the growing menace from ISIS. China would be able to provide the staple items in addition to public projects, like infrastructure, investment, geo- security and finance management. The launch of the “one belt one road (OBOR) initiative” was put forward by President Xi Jin-ping in 2013, covering all the matters concerned with what Beijing intends to gain and offer, and how the practical goals and means are available in the reconstruction of Afghanistan⁶. Since China has persistently increased its hard power and soft power, and with a view to becoming a responsible global power in the 21st century, Beijing has made it clear it wants to facilitate a working relationship with any great powers and international entities, like NATO, the largest military organization in the world. Yet at the same time China has tried to act cautiously and has insisted that any connection with NATO would be “within the framework of a partnership rather than an ally in conventional terms.”⁷ True, China has com-

mon interests with NATO only in view of anti-terrorism, bilateral relations and global cooperative security issues, for each side is also aware of its own independent policy priorities. Considering this, some scholars point out that it is favorable for China to interact with individual NATO member states in accordance with the mutual interests and the preservation of regional peace and stability⁸. Yet, this comment arouses debates since it seems to be more wishful than practical in view of the function and structure of NATO.

Over the past years, NATO has sent signals seeking consultation and cooperative regimes with China and other states with a view to fighting against terrorism in Afghanistan that was regarded as “NATO’s military operation”. At a key security summit held in Munich, in February 2010, Secretary-General Rasmussen admitted, NATO’s “troubled mission in Afghanistan demonstrated that it was vital to boost regular ties with its neighbors, like China, Pakistan and India.”⁹ In particular, as China and India are emerging powers with huge stakes in their neighbor’s stability, the two Asian powers could be helpful in securing peace and rebuilding war-worn Afghanistan. The same concern with Afghanistan goes for Russia as well, for it shares the security stakes of NATO. Similarly, a survey was made years ago and showed that NATO had an ambitious target to enhance the size of the Afghan security forces by nearly 50% to 305,000 by 2011, and reform its armed forces, to make them strong and efficient enough to take care of the security and vital interests of the fragile land. At the same time, the White House also announced it was to deploy 30,000 extra troops in an effort to turn the tide against the growing Taliban groups, before its plan to withdraw

⁵Cheng Guanjin & Cai xiao, “NATO Seeks Chinese Rebuilding Help for Kabul”, *China Daily*, March 25th, 2010, accessed April 6th, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-03/25/content_9638439.htm

⁶Ankit Panda, “Afghanistan and China Opens a New Chapter”, *The Diplomat*, October 29th, 2014, accessed April 10th, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/afghanistan-and-china-open-a-new-chapter/>

⁷Gao Hua, “China Starts Dialogue with NATO”, *World Economy and Politics*, Issue 6, 2003, p. 59.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Cheng Guanjin & Cai xiao, “NATO Seeks Chinese Rebuilding Help for Kabul”, *China Daily*, March 25th, 2010, accessed April 6th, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-03/25/content_9638439.htm

U.S. troops was completed by the mid-2011¹⁰. Taking into account these considerations, NATO welcomed China to help extend cooperative security mechanism to its fragile neighborhood. Is this a reasonable decision for China to make in view of this uncertain dividend?

Some scholars from both China and abroad have raised the central issue that how China and NATO would respond to common “threats”. People who have watched the volatile changes of the Afghan issue have argued in favor of engaging China into military actions so that the countries involved could create a future cooperative security regime in the troubled spots including Afghanistan and the Mediterranean probably via NATO as follows:

- Be willing to modify the current UN norm of the responsibility to protection (R2P) with a view to regaining the consensus on the norms among the great powers in the 21st century;

- To acknowledge a geographic division of work within NATO, that is, for its member states to agree to take on a greater responsibility for grave crises in the neighborhood while the United States is supposed to be more engaged in the Asia–Pacific region¹¹.

Although debatable, public opinions have evolved to the point that Europe and the United States should accept that the current international order based on the West’s values and norms and preserved by force will not be universalized as their material or ideological dominance wanes with the rise of China and other emerging powers. Due to this, it is necessary for “ruling” powers to find common grounds with “rising” powers, so that they can forge a much broader rules-based global order in the 21st century. Since we are confronted with an era of geopolitical flux and uncertainty, a strong and resolute cooperative security re-

gime among the states involved would act as an “insurance cover” of the ongoing changes. Liberal scholars further insist on the “strengthening of the liberal anchor” with a sensible view to constructing the global partnership through consultation and transparency. To that end, peacefully managing the onset of a polycentric world will require compromise, tolerance and the recognition of existing political diversity¹². Considering the Afghan people who have suffered so much for so long in the war-worn homeland, a cooperative security is workable only if NATO consults Pakistan, India, Russia and particularly China to determine common interests and mutually respected grounds.

2

Consensus among different powers or political entities might be possible once their bilateral or multilateral relations are involved. This is due to the fact that stability or relative security results more from a generally accepted consensus. Yet in foreign affairs, consensus, as here used, commonly means a bilateral or multilateral agreement about the nature of workable regimes and about the permissible aims and means of foreign policy. As Henry Kissinger said earlier, it implies the acceptance of the framework of the international or regional orders by all major powers involved. Doubtless, the consensus of the great powers can’t assure a unanimous outlook, yet in each case of crisis, it is accepted that stability and peace can be achieved through cooperative security¹³. Given that China has striven to promote its soft power and self-image in world affairs; an ambitious, rising China actually needs a stable milieu along its often-disputed borders and to maintain a good relationship with as many foreign countries as it can. Arguably, China has no a

¹⁰Li Xiao-lu, “Afghanistan Issue: its Trend and Impact on China”, *Foreign Affairs Observer*, No. 3, 2015, pp. 168–170.

¹¹Trine Flockhart, Patrick Quirk etc., “New Report: NATO Should Adapt Geographic Division of Labor, Work with China in Mediterranean”, Transatlantic Academy, May 2nd, 2014, accessed April 16th, 2015, <http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/publications/liberal-order-in-a-post-western-world>

¹²Sanjeev Miglani, “China steps up Afghan role as Western Pullout nears”, Reuters, June 3rd, 2012. Accessed May 4th, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/03/us-afghanistan-china-idUSBRE85203320120603>

¹³Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, London: Allen Lane, 2014, p. 65.

clear-cut strategy for NATO but rather a series of general ideas and tactics. But China's approach to the member states of NATO has been seen as a kind of soft challenge to the U.S. hegemony and even to its geo-political interests in a long run¹⁴.

In the case of Afghanistan, six powers are clearly involved—the United States and its NATO allies, Pakistan, India, Russia and China. Beijing kept a cautiously low profile through much of the decade-long effort to stabilize Afghanistan, by choosing instead to pursue an economic agenda including locking in future supply from Afghanistan's untapped mineral resources¹⁵. Now that the U.S.-led coalition wound up military engagement and handed over security to Kabul-led forces, China, along with other adjacent powers—Russia, Pakistan and India, will be gradually stepping up its involvement in the country that remains at risk from being overrun by Islamist insurgents. Yet, Chinese leader Hu Jin-tao and his Afghan counterpart Hamid Karzai held formal talks during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in 2012, and then signed a wide-ranging pact governing the mutual ties and security concerns between the two sides¹⁶. For practical considerations, the Afghan government has also signed a series of partnership agreements on security issues with the United States, India and Britain among others. This strategy was described by one Afghan official as taking out an "insurance cover" for the period after the end of 2014 when foreign troops would leave¹⁷.

For the sake of security, Chinese leaders have decided to take a proactive policy on its Western borders as a test case of playing a responsible role in light of the UN Charters. As President Xi Jin-ping endorses the "OBOR"

initiative to further prompt China's going abroad, it is logical for Beijing to get involved in Afghanistan issues. The prospects of the Kabul government are uncertain, but the opportunities for China's dividends acting as a responsible power remain attractive and rewarding as well¹⁸.

Here is the central question: how has China regarded NATO as a whole in terms of cooperative security? Retrospectively, in the absence of more alternatives in the late 1980s, China saw the EU as a strong source of high-tech transfer, including some advanced military hardware from Germany, France, Britain and the Netherlands, which are member states of the EU and NATO as well¹⁹. It has been more politically complicated since 1989, yet people came to consider that it is in China's interests to create mutual understanding and affinity with its cause in the EU, for NATO remains the core of the EU's Common Security and Foreign Policy. Strategically speaking, it is necessary for China to interact with the individual member states of NATO and the organization *en bloc* as well. It is the world order that NATO has encouraged and is designed to address.

In 2011, Rasmussen reiterated at a conference that "Today's security challenges are increasingly transnational and the most effective responses include the broadest range of partners, countries and international organizations alike"²⁰. So, cooperative security makes the most sense given the nature of contemporary threats and budgetary cutbacks. Within this cooperative and multiple world order, NATO would be seen as one of the key actors in a globalized collective security and crisis-control regime. No doubt, Beijing has favored a multiple and inclusive world order in which China should be treated as a great power equal to the

¹⁴Sanjeev Miglani, "China steps up Afghan role as Western Pullout nears", *op.cit.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*, *op.cit.*

¹⁶"China Established Strategic Partnership with Afghanistan", *People's Daily*, June 8th, 2012, accessed May 4th, 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/18120640.html>

¹⁷"Strategic Agreements", Office of the President of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, accessed April 20th, 2015, <http://president.gov.af/en/documents/category/strategic-agreements>

¹⁸Zhao Hua-sheng, "China and Afghanistan: Chinese Interest, position and opinions", *Russian Studies*, No. 117, Oct. 2012, pp. 3–5.

¹⁹Kissinger, *On China*, p. 373.

²⁰"Secretary General's Annual Report 2011", NATO, January 26th, 2012: accessed April 20th, 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-68267CB2-C8C6573E/natolive/opinions_82646.htm

most powerful one in world affairs²¹. As far as geopolitical and geo-economic matters are concerned, NATO/EU, U.S. and China together constitute 60% of the world economy. In addition the U.S. is the prime military power and consumer, China offers capital and labor, and NATO/EU endorse rules and technology and can play the role of strategic buffer between the U.S. and China in a long run. Each side is systematically relevant. Not only are they too big to fail, but their individual actions and decisions also impact world affairs. Furthermore, the trilateral parties would be essentially posited as an inclusive burden-sharing mechanism capable of maintaining a balance of mutual benefit but not power. Can China and NATO identify areas of political consensus? Afghanistan might constitute one such topic for the new-type of security regime of this century.

First, NATO's strategic interest in Afghanistan will diminish after the drawdown of U.S. forces and the transition to Afghan-led stability operations. Next, either a stagnating or a gradually resilient Russia is surely another topic for NATO-China dialogue, since the risk of strategic miscalculation would make Russia a difficult focus for the future relationship. Then, how to manage India's rise is important for NATO-Chinese strategic dialogue, and should also be discussed strategic ties between China and Pakistan. For sure, the preservation of the "Global Consensus" appears to be a non-starter as a cooperative venture, given the normative differences between China and NATO over rights and responsibilities within maritime Exclusive Economic Zones, let alone the silent rivals in cyberspace and inability to judge each other's intentions²². The bi-annual 'back-door' two-side talks are translated into a dialogue and then a possible strategic partnership. NATO/EU and China relations could

turn into a strategic partnership which involves the enlarged institutionalized West that would set up consultative programs to facilitate UN-mandated operations to manage regional flash-points.

3

During the early phase of NATO's missions in the Afghanistan War, the Chinese government cautiously watched what was going on due to domestic concerns and external Muslim sensitivities. According to Chinese sources, in 2008 the then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown asked if China would send troops to join the "International Security Assistance Force" (ISAF) deployed in Afghanistan; and later U.S. military authorities also invited Chinese counterparts to take part in NATO troops' logistic network²³. The Beijing authorities simply declined both cases by insisting on the conventional tenet of "non-intervention".

However in recent years, China has been intensifying its diplomatic efforts to help build a peaceful and stable Afghanistan by hosting regional meetings on the issue in Turkey and strengthening bilateral ties with Kabul²⁴. China's intention to play a more proactive and helpful role is motivated by various considerations. First, as one of major powers in the region, China wants to be seen as a responsible player in promoting security and prosperity in Afghanistan, thus improving its image in the world. Second, it is also in China's economic and security interests to play a more transparent role in Afghanistan. President Xi and his aides have paid great attention to the good-neighborhood, with aims to promote the "one belt one road initiative" and to cover the greater part of Eurasia. Yet the multifarious security challenges lying ahead make it necessary for China to bolster security cooperation

²¹Andrew Scobell, "Sino-U.S. Military Cooperation: How do we dance together", *Foreign Affairs Observer*, No. 3, 2014, pp. 22–23.

²²Graeme Herd, "Shifting Power Dynamics: Implications of the U. S. Strategic Pivot for China–NATO Relations", *China and World*, ed. Liu Debin, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2012, pp. 149–151.

²³Zhao Hua-sheng, "China and Afghanistan: Chinese Interest, position and opinions", *Russian Studies*, No. 117, Oct. 2012, p. 3.

²⁴"Turkey Committed to Istanbul Process", Xinhua English News, 1st October 2014; http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2014-11/01/c_133757645.htm, accessed 6th September 2015.

with partner countries in the region concerned²⁵. This leads to China's ambition to act as the "honest broker" between the diverse rivals in Afghan politics. Reportedly, in early 2015, China hosted a trilateral dialogue involving key officials from Pakistan and Afghanistan to discuss all efforts to seek reconciliation with the Taliban²⁶. It was the first time Beijing involved itself directly and openly in terms of stabilizing the fragile country. To that end, Afghan foreign ministry spokesman Janan Musazai said clearly, the Kabul government appreciated any effort to bring peace in Afghanistan. "China has close ties with Afghanistan. It also has very close ties with Pakistan and if it can help advance the vision of peace and stability in Afghanistan we welcome it"²⁷. At the same time, China has held regular meetings on the Afghan issue with Russia, India, Iran and definitely Pakistan.

However, NATO is still the key player in view of resolving the Afghan crisis. China is well-aware of this and has been seeking cooperative security with NATO. Given this, both China and NATO can work together according to mutual understanding and respect. Yet, the United States seems to have been ambivalent in view of China's future role in the peaceful settlement of Afghan issue. First, the U.S. openly champions a liberal international order based on free trade, social advancement and market-democratic states, with a more explicit military-security dimension based on two pillars: a renewed engagement with Europe through a new 'Transatlantic Bargain'; and, a neo-containment policy in the Asia-Pacific, based on revitalized trade partners and defense alliances in that region. Second, in response to the logic of power-shifts to China and growing interdependence and competition for finite

energy resources and raw materials, NATO utilizes existing and creates new regional partnerships to balance China in Central, South and East Asia. One could envisage, e.g. the Philippines, Japan, Korea (ROK), Australia, New Zealand, Vietnam, even India creating alternative regional organizations that exclude China, or looking to NATO to formalize a partnership program in East and South Asia to do just that²⁸.

For the European Allies, political support for the U.S. is offered in exchange for U.S. economic security commitments and solidarity, more necessary in terms of China leveraging its net creditor status and 3.2 trillion U.S. dollar reserves to directly shape the rules of the game in global trade and finance. For the White House, the institutional weight and political legitimacy of NATO acting through the North Atlantic Council would be more important than the military efficiency and effectiveness of NATO Allies. In East Asia where the rise of China looms, the military efficiency and effectiveness of U.S. allies and partners in this region will be as important as the political legitimacy that such an alliance system would bring²⁹. While some strategic analysts view China as a country in open military and ideological competition with the U.S., others view China as one that wants to be in the front seat of global governance and strategic decision-making, besides the U.S. driver as a co-equal. But China is actually either unable or unwilling to rebuild a Sino-centric regional order, let alone attain global hegemony. First comes Russia's suspicion. As Zbigniew Brzezinski put it in the 1990s, "No Russian concerned with the country's future can ignore the fact that China is on its way to being a more advanced, more dynamic, and perhaps more successful

²⁵Yan Shaohua, "Why the 'One Belt One Road' Initiative Matters for the EU?", *The Diplomat*, April 9th, 2015

²⁶"The First Round of China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue Held in Kabul", Foreign Ministry of China, February 10th, 2015, access May 4th, 2015, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1236606.shtml

²⁷Li Ke-qiang, "China willing to play constructive role in Afghan reconstruction", Xinhua news, 16th December, 2014. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-12/16/c_127306705.htm, accessed 12 September, 2015

²⁸Herd, "Shifting Power Dynamics: Implications of the U. S. Strategic Pivot for China-NATO Relations", p. 142.

²⁹*ibid.*, p. 143.

state than Russia”³⁰. As a result, the Central Asian states that control vast mineral and energy deposits are bound to tempt China’s geo-political and geo-economic interests. This new reality inevitably affects the Russian sense of security in their new frontiers, both the Far East and the Central Asia. Also, India and the United States are similarly sensitive to the rise of China with huge interests in the vast security region.

For sure, the United States would like to use coalitions of NATO member states and their military assets, hoping to reach political consensus on a given operation it deems necessary: both military assets and more importantly regional political legitimacy. As the Chicago Summit declaration points out, NATO is not just a military alliance held together by external threats, but is more than ever a community of liberal democratic values and norms. NATO supports the aspirations of the people of the region for democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law that underpin the existing Alliance”³¹. Loyalty, solidarity, mutual trust, confidence and a common history, ethos and ideology help first and foremost manage security relations amongst the member states. Yet, when dealing to China, they are surely deemed as an ideological ‘threat’ to the security of China.

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According to our study of China-NATO interaction over the latest decade in terms of cooperative security regime, it is necessary to present an analysis, in the concluding part, of the consultation and cooperation between the two sides in tackling the Afghanistan issues. Since 2014, China’s foreign policy towards Afghanistan has become more proactive and dynamic. In October, Beijing hosted the fourth

foreign ministers’ meeting of the “Istanbul Process”—an international effort launched in 2011 to encourage cooperation and coordination between Afghanistan and its neighbors and regional partners. By hosting this event for the first time, China expressed to the world its desire and capacity to take the initiative in promoting a smooth power transfer after Afghanistan’s 2014 presidential election and a security transition following the withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops and U.S. combat forces, which took place in December 2014³². The “Istanbul Process” meeting (2015) also demonstrated China’s sincerity toward regional and international consensus on rebuilding Afghanistan. Similarly, China hopes to use this multilateral framework to propose its own ideas for securing Afghanistan’s future, and then to win other nations’ support for its approach³³. Can NATO accept China’s initiative and settlements? The answer is positive as follows.

Historically, it is true that ideological solidarity is very important as a cause of alliance, as Stephen Walt argued³⁴. Yet, China and NATO do not need the status of alliance in a conventional sense, but rather a new-type of cooperative security regime in Afghanistan. In addition, the consensus that is defined does not rest on an ideology that usually prescribes transnational unity. And this is not the case of the rapprochement between China and NATO. Frankly speaking, China and most NATO member states would likely stick to classical diplomacy rather than embrace the new diplomacy that has been endorsed by the United States in terms of democracy, liberty and human rights. Therefore, although different in terms social values and norms, China and NATO have no ideological rifts which could lead to national confrontations.

³⁰Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), pp. 93–95.

³¹NATO, “Chicago Summit Declaration: Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Chicago on 20 May 2012,” Press Release O62, 2012. Para.39. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87593.htm, accessed 12 September, 2015

³²Li Xiao-lu, “Afghanistan Issue: its Trend and Impact on China”, p. 166.

³³China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi, “Speech on China’s Diplomacy in 2014” at Center for SCO Studies, Shanghai Academy of Social Science, 6th January, 2015. <http://www.coscos.org.cn/a/scoevents/2015/0116/668.html>, accessed on 8th September 2015.

³⁴Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p. 37.

Diplomatically, compared to NATO and the United States today, China is in a relatively stronger position to offer probable mediation among various groups in Afghanistan politics and to help to coordinate issues between Afghanistan and its neighbors, which have an obvious role to play in view of security and reconstruction in this war-worn country. A consensus among these powers on their mutual positions and policies would help to ensure a stable power-transition in Afghanistan and especially for its people. In addition, SCO as a regional security regime involving most of Afghanistan's neighbors and adjacent states is an important multilateral platform for coordinating policies toward Afghanistan. For example, as previously discussed, in February 2015, following three earlier sets of talks, the first round of the trilateral strategic dialogue was held in Kabul between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Similar talks also took place between China, Russia, and India, as did a second round of talks between China and Iran³⁵.

Yet, the United States has at times revealed mixed attitudes toward China's role in Afghanistan. Washington has encouraged Beijing to provide more assistance to Afghanistan and to take on greater responsibility there. But when China does this, some in the White House worry that China's influence is on the rise. Considering the possible dilemma of some NATO member states, China has clearly stated that it has no intention to fill any geo-security void left by the US in the fragile Afghanistan. The top chiefs of NATO are well-aware of the dilemma, for Afghanistan is now facing a security issue that leaves little room for optimism and its economy is in shambles. China's increasing power and influence in Afghanistan reflect Beijing's commitment to invest resources and share responsibilities, but it should not be seen as an attempt to acquire power³⁶.

Politically, China indicates its willingness and capability to play a constructive role in the Afghan reconciliation process and post-war reconstruction, as Foreign Minister Wang Yi addressed at Shanghai forum in May 2015³⁷. Although it is clear that mediating Afghanistan's domestic conflicts is an undertaking where the risks are greater than the chances of success, China is relatively well-equipped to take on the role of peace-maker. Not long ago, high-level officials of each country paid a visit to each other, discussed all the key topics involved, including deputy chief of PLA general staff, Lieutenant General Qi Jianguo, who secretly visited Afghanistan as a special envoy of China's President.

Economically, China's aid to Afghanistan have also increased significantly. In 2014 alone, China provided Afghanistan with 500 million RMB (\$80 million) of aid and pledged to provide an additional 1.5 billion RMB (\$240 million) over the next three years. In addition, China agreed to train 3,000 Afghan professionals in various fields such as counterterrorism, anti-drug trafficking, agriculture and diplomacy. Within the framework of China's New Silk Road Economic-belt strategy (another term of OBOR), the two countries will have many opportunities for further closer cooperation³⁸.

In brief, China deems that political reconciliation of the Afghan authorities and the Taliban is one of the best ways to ensure a successful political and security transition in the country. To realize this goal, China appears open-minded, self-confident and ready to work with NATO, along with other great powers, in ensuring that Afghanistan is governed by the Afghan people and for the people. The post-Afghanistan era expectedly presents a real opportunity for China and NATO to move forward from strange rivals to strategic partners.

³⁵Yan Shaohua, "Why the 'One Belt One Road' Initiative Matters for the EU?", *The Diplomat*, April 9th, 2015

³⁶Herd, "Shifting Power Dynamics: Implications of the U. S. Strategic Pivot for China—NATO Relations", p. 144.

³⁷Wang Yi, "Speech on China's Diplomacy in 2014" at Center for SCO Studies. <http://www.coscos.org.cn/a/scoevents/2015/0116/668.html>, accessed on 8th September 2015.

³⁸Michael Clarke, "Understanding China's Eurasian Pivot—one belt one road strategy provides a guide to the future of China in Eurasia", *The Diplomat*, 15th September 2015.