

# CHINA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE STABILIZATION OF 'DEMOCRATIC' AFGHANISTAN

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## Introduction:

The People's Republic of China and Afghanistan established diplomatic relations in 1955. In the following decades of the Cold War, however, relations between the countries were limited, which was due to the main directions of the foreign policies of both countries. Afghanistan focused on balancing the influence of the USSR and the US on its territory. China, in turn, adopted a rotational stance towards superpowers, and in the region, it strengthened political, economic and military cooperation with Pakistan (Zaborowski 2012, 142). In the 1970s, China supported the pro-communist Shu'lai Javid (Eternal Flame) party operating in Afghanistan. Members of Parcham, the pro-Moscow wing of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), contemptuously described its members as Maoists (Levi-Sanchez 2017, 46). During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Beijing allowed Xinjiang Uyghur Muslim fighters to pass through the Wakhan Corridor into Afghanistan to support the mujahideen insurgency there. At that time, political relations between states were maintained only at the consular level.

By February 1989, the Soviets withdrew their troops from Afghanistan, and in September 1992 the last communist president - Mohammad Najibullah (09.1987-09.1992) was overthrown. However, this did not end the civil war, as individual mujahideen groups fought for influence in the country. The war destabilized not only Afghanistan, but also the border areas of neighboring countries, including the Western border of the PRC. In 1992, the President of Afghanistan - Burhanuddin Rabbani (06.1992-09.1996) tried to normalize relations with Beijing, but due to increasing military operations in 1993 China

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withdrew its diplomatic representation from Kabul. When the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in 1996, the country fell into international isolation in which China participated. During the Taliban regime, Afghanistan hosted al-Qaeda, which trained around 1,000 Uyghur fighters in the camps there. In Beijing, this caused serious concern and encouraged the Chinese authorities to intensify security cooperation with Pakistan. According to leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), most of the security problems in the Muslim-dominated Xinjiang province were to be caused by neighboring Afghanistan. For example, the 1997 incidents in the province, known as the Yining riots, were considered to be Taliban-inspired (Cheema 2002, 308).

## China Towards the International Anti-Terrorist Coalition in Afghanistan

After the al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the United States declared a global war on terror that began with military intervention in Afghanistan. Despite some reservations, the PRC did not oppose the US invasion of its neighbor. It offered the US intelligence cooperation in terms of sharing information on jihadist groups operating in the region (Ali 2015, 116, 121). It was in Beijing's interest, as these groups collaborated with Uyghur fighters. China also encouraged the President of Pakistan - Pervez Musharraf (06.2001-08.2008) to cooperate with Washington on Afghanistan. It is debatable whether China really wanted to facilitate the operation of the anti-terrorist coalition in Afghanistan or whether it was a ruse to deepen the rapidly growing anti-American attitudes among Pakistanis. Beijing decided not to give more serious support to the US during Operation Enduring Freedom. It prevented the use of its airports and airspace for combat operations and even providing humanitarian aid to Afghans (Roberts 2015, 101, 149).

The PRC remained largely restrained in helping the Americans during the war in Afghanistan, even though it was also conducted in its interest (Ruttig 2014, 182). The purpose of the war was to break up al-Qaeda and overthrow the Taliban, who were the main external support for Xinjiang separatists. During the war, the Americans captured and detained 22 Uyghur fighters in a camp in Guantánamo (Zhao 2012, 3). NATO's military actions in Afghanistan and elsewhere have led to a significant weakening of al-Qaeda and the temporary removal of the Taliban from power. However, these groupings were not finally defeated, among others thanks to safe harbors in Pakistan, including the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). For this reason, the border of

China with Afghanistan and Pakistan has been secured by relatively strong-armed troops, but it is not impenetrable. Support for Uyghur separatists from the Taliban and al-Qaeda has been limited, but they still receive weapons and explosives from extremists and jihadists operating in the region (Kam 2017, 193-194). The regaining of Taliban power in Afghanistan in August 2021 potentially increases the possibility of this support.

The United States has lost a decade in armed conflicts on the two main fronts of the global war on terror - Afghanistan and Iraq. They incurred a huge cost, both in terms of financial and equipment, as well as human and image. It can be argued that the Americans have suffered a double defeat in the global war on terror. Firstly, their efforts did not bring the expected results, i.e. stabilizing the occupied countries and consolidating their influence in them. Secondly, they neglected areas of even more geopolitical importance, namely East Asia and Southeast Asia (Denmark 2015, 16). Currently, Washington is trying to reorient its strategy to these regions, and more broadly to the entire Indo-Pacific, to maintain its dominant position, there. China, in turn, used the time of the global war on terror for impressive economic growth (GDP jumped from \$1.3 trillion in 2001 to \$14.7 trillion in 2020), and technological and military development. It also strengthened its influence in various parts of the world, mainly in Asia and Africa. Beijing is aware that Washington's pivot to the Indo-Pacific is aimed primarily against China, which is rapidly growing in strength. So far, however, the PRC has avoided an open confrontation with the US, which could hinder the achievement of its main strategic goal, i.e., building a stable internal and external environment, enabling the continuation of economic expansion (Yuan 2015, 30). On the other hand, it shows an increasingly assertive attitude in the South China Sea and East China Sea, defending its strategic interests there (Medcalf 2015, 167).

The PRC was much less determined than the US in terms of strengthening its influence in Afghanistan. Beijing was comfortable with the Washington-led anti-terrorist coalition playing a major role in Afghanistan in terms of security. Despite the great threat posed by the neighborhood of Afghanistan, China was not interested in incurring such substantial costs to stabilize the country as the Americans or many of their NATO allies did (Tai 2015, 161-162). In the years 2001-2021, the US allocated \$825 billion directly for this purpose, and China did not actually contribute. During this period, 2.442 US soldiers and no Chinese soldier were killed in Afghanistan (Duzor 2021). Beijing has capitalized on the dedication of the US and other NATO allies and partner countries. Without making an appropriate military and financial contribution, it focused on pursuing its own economic interests in the country. The attitude of Beijing aroused justified irritation and criticism

from active members of the anti-terrorist coalition. They tried to force China to send a military contingent to Afghanistan and make a much larger financial contribution to the process of post-war reconstruction of the country, but it did not bring the expected results.

China has even distanced itself from the concept of the so-called Northern Distribution Network (NDN). The aim of the venture was to supply the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from the north, as supplies from the south via Pakistan were constantly threatened by attacks by the local Taliban. The NDN route ran from the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, through Russia and the countries of Central Asia, reaching Afghanistan mainly from Uzbekistan and partly from Tajikistan. It should be noted that this route supplied ISAF only with non-combat supplies. China's participation in the project was extremely modest and was about the construction of a few sections of the route. It can be assumed that China's involvement in these works was not motivated by the facilitation of ISAF's operation. A much more likely motive was the interest of the PRC aimed at the integration of Central and South Asian markets through the development of communication networks (Opacin 2015, 55). Beijing has not decided to open for ISAF a route on the Wakhan Corridor connecting Afghanistan with China. It is worth noting that for NATO it was supposed to be primarily symbolic, showing the solidarity of the great powers in the fight against the Taliban. Due to the difficult geographic and climatic conditions in the area and the lack of adequate transport infrastructure, the corridor on the Sino-Afghan border would certainly not become the main non-combat supply route for ISAF. China's unequivocal refusal was based on two basic premises. First, the PRC has avoided becoming involved in the US war campaign in Afghanistan. Second, it wanted to keep Americans away from Xinjiang Province and Tibet (Zhao 2012, 8). The reason is Washington's pressure on Beijing for decades to respect the human rights and cultural diversity of the inhabitants of these Chinese regions (Ali 2008, 156).

## **Strategic Objectives and Priorities for China's Engagement in 'Democratic' Afghanistan**

According to the theory of capitalist peace, sustainable development, and the tightening of economic relations between partners reduce the risk of an armed conflict. The resource-intensive PRC was engaged in increasing the security of the resource-rich Afghanistan, and it did so by making use of economic methods. The common goals of both countries were security and development, which encouraged them to cooperate. In practice, this was to

lead not only to securing Sino-Afghan relations, but also to stabilizing the entire region (Opacin 2015, 56-57). However, the authorities and societies of these countries did not share the common values of democracy and human rights, which would additionally increase the chances of peace (Dunne 2008, 230-231). Moreover, the economies of both countries were far from free market. Nevertheless, market integration, economic development and the community of economic interests are important stabilizing factors (Gartzke 2007, 174-175). Tightening economic relations and increasing interdependence, bringing benefits to all participants of economic processes, may contribute to a significant reduction in the risk of a war between them, as well as internal instability in individual countries.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, two values - peace and development - remained the unchanging leitmotifs of China's domestic and foreign policy. The basic strategic goals of the Middle Kingdom were also inviolable. In the internal dimension, it was the maintenance of stability as well as economic and social development. In the external dimension, it was maintaining peace and enhancing friendly international cooperation with all countries to achieve mutual benefits. Subsequent PRC defense white papers included many other persistent goals that were increasingly emphasized. China's approach to Afghanistan's security was most significantly conditioned by the following objectives (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2019):

- building a multipolar security system in opposition to the hegemonic position of the United States,
- limiting the influence of the United States in the neighborhood of China,
- counteracting the phenomena of terrorism, extremism and separatism,
- counteracting organized crime, including drug-related crime,
- upholding the state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of states,
- respecting the diversity of political and socio-economic systems;
- promoting economic cooperation, trade and market integration;
- strengthening the United Nations;
- promoting dialogue and diplomatic cooperation between states and developing of mutual trust;
- peaceful international conflict and disputes resolution;
- developing of the armed forces to ensure own security, defending own interests and supporting international peace;

- ensuring access to natural resources, including energy resources;
- eliminating development gap between countries.

According to James Dobbins, the order of China's priorities towards Afghanistan was as follows (Dobbins 2014, 164):

- eliminating the military presence of Western countries, mainly the United States, from Afghanistan and Central Asia;
- stopping the development of extremism and terrorism in the region, and above all cutting off these organizations from supporting the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang province;
- supporting China-friendly Pakistan and isolating it from the instability of Afghanistan;
- limiting the influence of Russia and India in Central Asia;
- ensuring access to Afghanistan's natural resources, including natural gas and metals;
- strengthening the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the region.

The above-mentioned goals and priorities require some clarification. First of all, the elimination of the military presence of NATO countries from Afghanistan concerned a longer time perspective. NATO, mainly the United States, was the only external entity that could strengthen Afghanistan's security and stability. This was due to the US's much greater readiness than other countries to use in Afghanistan its own (enormous) political, military, and economic potential. The problem, however, was the limited effectiveness of the strategy implemented by Washington in that country. As previously mentioned, the activities of the US-led coalition were focused on combating extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan. Its efforts led to the temporary, relative stabilization of some regions of the country and allowed China to start investing. Beijing, however, was aware that its "free riding" in Afghanistan could not continue indefinitely. It also did not believe in the US's ability to bring lasting peace to that country. Moreover, in the context of intensifying global strategic rivalry, China was reluctant to the permanent political, economic and, above all, military presence of its main competitor in Afghanistan.

International terrorism is one of the main threats to China, alongside the hegemonic policy of the United States. Beijing consciously links it to the phenomenon of separatism threatening Xinjiang Province, as well as to the issue of unbalanced economic growth. Unlike the US, China prefers

multilateral preventive actions with the use of regional political, economic, and military organizations. These organizations take up, among others, the problem of the so-called economic terrorism aimed at restricting international trade (Lanteigne 2016, 116). In terms of organized crime, China has also increasingly felt the negative effects of the development of the Afghan drug industry. Afghanistan has become the second largest supplier of drugs to the Chinese people after Southeast Asia. The main route for smuggling Afghan drugs to China is the Karakoram Highway from Pakistani Gilgit to Chinese Kashgar and further to Urumqi - the capital of Xinjiang Province, and from there to the east coast of the country. Alternative routes pass through the territories of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It mainly affects the sensitive province of Xinjiang. In the example of 2006, 14 perpetrators were arrested, and 65 tons of heroin were seized, and a year later 29 perpetrators and 147 tons of heroin were seized (Głogowski 2013, 267).

The PRC is actively developing political, economic and, to some extent, military cooperation with the countries of the region. The economy is the priority, and the dominant economic position is the main goal. China achieves it thanks to investment opportunities, a system of incentives, as well as readiness to cooperate with any state partner, regardless of its political system. As indicated, China wants to maintain international peace and stability so that it can sustain the development of its own export-oriented economy. For this reason, Beijing supports peace processes in the region with soft methods. It treats diplomatic solutions and economic activities as priorities. Reaching for the military factor occurs only as a last resort and in accordance with the principles of the United Nations like non-interference in the internal affairs. This *modus operandi* was also used in the PRC's approach to Afghanistan. China conducted lively political consultations with Afghanistan, as well as implemented multibillion-dollar investments in the mining sector. This was to enable China to diversify supplies of individual raw materials, and for Afghanistan to be an important development impulse. The accelerated economic development was to translate into the stabilization processes of the state. Among China's largest investments in Afghanistan were the Mes Aynak copper mine in Logar Province and the oil and natural gas fields in the Amu Darya Basin in Sar-e Pol and Faryab provinces. China has competitors in the region whose influence it is trying to limit. Apart from the aforementioned United States, this is mainly India, but also Russia, which is seemingly friendly to China.

Acting in line with the previously indicated goals and priorities, the PRC promoted a policy of national reconciliation in Afghanistan, which was key to the peace process. Beijing's motivation in this regard resulted from two

basic complexes. First, the CCP leaders believed that the Taliban could not be defeated by arms. Second, they knew that the movement could sustain itself on the Afghan political and military scene for a long time. A balanced approach to the Taliban was to protect China if they regained power. For this reason, Beijing did not try to interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs, especially to impose systemic solutions. China's strength as an intermediary was that the parties to the conflict saw it as a relatively neutral partner. There is no historical burden on relations between China and Afghanistan. Additionally, China has a significant influence on the government of Pakistan, which is the home of the Taliban (Gajda 2015, 5). In the initial phase of the negotiations, Beijing enjoyed greater trust of the parties than the US or Russia (Gacek 2013, 101). The PRC's special envoy to Afghanistan, Sun Yuxi, met several times with Taliban representatives in Peshawar, Pakistan. Also, the Taliban delegation from Doha (Qatar), led by Qari Din Mohammad, visited China. They talked about the so-called Istanbul Process (Szcudlik-Tatar, 2014, 5), which will be discussed later. In May 2015, Chinese authorities also organized confidential talks between Afghan officials and Taliban leaders in Urumqi, Xinjiang (Curtis 2016). Even if such peace initiatives were only partially successful, they could still have an important stabilizing effect on the security of Afghanistan (Gudalov 2016, 160).

In June 2021 China introduced its inclusive 8-point Afghan Plan for national reconciliation. On July 28, 2021, in Tianjin Minister of Foreign Affairs - Wang Yi met with the Taliban delegation led by head of the Afghan Taliban political committee - Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. The Taliban assured their partner that they would not allow any actions harmful to China. After the Taliban seizure of Kabul, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying said: "We are ready to continue to develop good-neighborliness and friendly cooperation with Afghanistan and play a constructive role in Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction." She also expressed her satisfaction at the Taliban's openness to cooperation with China and the hope for building a broad political representation, counteracting terrorism, and protecting civilians (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson 2021).

## Bilateral Cooperation Between China and Afghanistan for Security

Shortly after the swearing-in of the Transitional Government of Afghanistan in January 2002, President Hamid Karzai (12.2001-09.2014) paid a visit to Beijing. A month later, China reopened its embassy in Kabul. On

December 22, 2002, China, along with other states bordering Afghanistan, signed the Kabul Declaration on Good Neighborly Relations. The signatories pledged to respect the territorial integrity and political independence of Afghanistan, support the peace process in that country, take steps to stabilize the region, fight terrorism, extremism and drug smuggling, and assist in the reconstruction of Afghanistan (Kabul Declaration 2002).

In the following years, Hamid Karzai, who was both president and head of government, visited China several times, but no return visit has taken place at such a high political level. During the meeting in Beijing on June 19, 2006, President Karzai and President Hu Jintao (03.2003-03.2013) signed the Treaty of China-Afghanistan Friendship, Cooperation and Good-neighborly Relations. Among the many aspects of the common concern, security and economic cooperation were treated as a priority. In the area of security, the parties declared cooperation to combat terrorism, separatism, organized crime, and drug smuggling (Joint Statement 2006).

On March 24, 2010, the President of Afghanistan began another three-day visit to Beijing. During it, three important agreements were signed regulating Afghan-Chinese relations, namely the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation, the Letter of Exchange on Training Program and the Letter of Exchange on Granting Special Preferential Tariff Treatment to Certain Goods Originated in Afghanistan and Exported to China (China--Afghanistan Relations 2011).

During the meeting in Beijing on June 8, 2012, the presidents of states decided to raise the importance of bilateral relations signing the Joint Declaration on Establishing Strategic and Cooperative Partnership. President Hu made a pledge of long-term friendly cooperation with Afghanistan, contribution to the development of bilateral ties and assistance. According to him, cooperation and aid for Afghanistan were to result from common fundamental interests and translate into the strengthening of regional and world peace, stability, and development. The enhanced cooperation declared by leaders was primarily to consist in (Xinhua 2012):

- deepening political trust and maintaining close contacts at high political levels in order to develop strategic communication on key issues;
- developing of economic, trade and investment cooperation, cooperating in the implementation of joint projects, developing of the mining, energy, infrastructure and agriculture sectors;
- strengthening cooperation in the fields of education, culture, media and personnel training;
- strengthening cooperation in the field of security, mainly combating

terrorism, separatism and extremism, as well as transnational crime, including drug-related crime;

- developing of multilateral coordination and cooperation within the SCO;
- providing aid for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

During the discussed meeting of presidents in Beijing in 2012, Hamid Karzai recognized the sovereignty of the PRC over Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang Province (Sadr 2016, 65). It was both an expression of support for China's unity and Beijing's fight against all forms of separatism. President Karzai has repeatedly expressed his gratitude for China's commitment to provide stability, support, and development to Afghanistan (Karzai 2012). It is significant that shortly after the presidents' meeting, diplomatic tensions arose between the states. The reason was the reduction by China of the weekly quota of visas for Afghans to just 50, with the introduction of a requirement for an invitation from Chinese 'sponsors'. As a consequence, direct flights from Kabul to Urumqi were temporarily suspended.

On September 23, 2012, Zhou Yongkang, the Minister of Public Security and the Secretary of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, flew to Kabul for four hours, becoming the most senior Chinese leader to visit the country since 1966, when Kabul was visited by President Liao Shaoqi (04.1959-10.1968) (van der Kley 2014). During the short stay, several agreements on security and economic cooperation were signed. The Chinese minister described them as being in the mutual interest of the states to build a strategic partnership leading to peace, stability, and development in the region. He made a promise to boost support for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), because by the end of 2011 the Chinese had trained only about 200 of its officers and donated just \$ 4 million worth of technical equipment and supplies (Zaborowski 2012, 146). Courses for the Afghan National Police (ANP) officers were carried out in the People's Armed Police (PAP) training centers and covered basic police skills, such as crowd control and riot control, conducting criminal investigations and other duties related to maintaining internal security. Instructors of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted basic and advanced training for Afghan National Army (ANA) officers at the University of Nanjing (Cordesman, Hess 2014, 248).

During the visit in Beijing on September 25-28, 2013, President Karzai signed with President Xi Jinping (03.2013-...) China-Afghanistan Joint Statement on Deepening Strategic and Cooperative Partnership (2013). In July 2014 China appointed veteran diplomat Sun Yuxi as a special envoy to Afghanistan. Between October 28-31, 2014, President Ashraf Ghani (09.2014-08.2021) visited Beijing to meet President Xi. It is worth noting that this

was the first foreign visit of the newly sworn in president of Afghanistan. During the meeting, the heads of states issued the China-Afghanistan Joint Statement on Deepening Strategic and Cooperative Partnership. It confirmed the commitments made in 2012, as well as assured about activities for the development of political, economic, cultural and security cooperation. In the area of security, the parties agreed on cooperation in combating East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a separatist organization operating in the province of Xinjiang bordering Afghanistan, cooperating with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. During the meeting, President Xi repeatedly assured China's commitment to stabilizing Afghanistan and supporting the process of national reconciliation (Gajda 2015, 3). Similar statement was signed on May 18, 2016, in Beijing by the prime ministers of both countries - Abdullah Abdullah (09.2014-03.2020) and Li Keqiang (03.2013-...) (Joint Statement 2016). In March 2020, PRC leaders congratulated on the re-election of President Ashraf Ghani and called on all parties to accelerate the reconstruction and peace process in the war-torn country.

In total, between 2002 and 2009, China provided the Afghan government with \$ 180 million in aid, and between 2010-2014 another \$ 75 million (Cordesman, Hess 2014, 247). The amount of support was low, especially considering the huge economic potential of the PRC. For comparison, in 2002-2014, the United States granted Afghanistan development aid in the amount of over \$ 107 billion (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction 2015, 77), and China's main rival in the region - India - about \$ 2 billion (Zafar, Upadhyay 2016, 241). For several years, China was in the third ten in the rankings of Afghanistan's donors. There were several major reasons for such limited development aid of the PRC to Afghanistan during the transition period. Firstly, China was reluctant to explicitly support the actions of the American-led anti-terrorist coalition so as not to expose itself to fundamentalist forces. Secondly, the Chinese authorities first wanted to find out which groups would play a key role on the Afghan political scene after the withdrawal of NATO troops from the country (Downs 2012, 70). Thirdly, they focused on large economic investments intended to bring mutual benefits to states. In 2014, China promised additional support to the Afghan government in the amount of \$ 327 million over a four-year period, ie in 2015-2018, and in 2016 another \$ 100 million (Chia, Kalachelvam, Haiqi 2021). After the Taliban regained power in 2021, China offered \$ 31 million in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and called on international financial institutions to continue to support the country's reconstruction (Tian 2021).

China has implemented several infrastructure and training projects in Afghanistan. The flagships included the construction of the Kabul State

Hospital, the renovation of existing hospitals in Kabul and Kandahar, the implementation of irrigation projects in the Parwan province, the construction of a multifunctional conference hall in Kabul's presidential palace and the expansion of the University of Kabul. In addition, a small group of Afghan officials and technical staff were trained in China, next to the aforementioned officers (Zhao 2012, 6).

## **China's Cooperation with External Actors for the Security of Afghanistan**

To achieve the strategic goal of building a stable and predictable security environment in its neighborhood, China is undertaking several initiatives of multilateral and bilateral cooperation (Kizekova 2016, 142). The best solution for the PRC could be the identification, together with other global and regional powers, of areas of common threats and possible spaces for cooperation. The cooperation of the great powers in Afghanistan was to consist in the use of various tools and advantages to counteract security problems (Hoyt 2016, 119). However, it was very difficult for these powers to negotiate a consensus on this matter, due to the diversified interests and increasing rivalry, both in the economic, political, and military areas (Qassem 2009, 157).

As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the PRC considers this entity to be key in deciding on the approach of the international community to the issue of Afghanistan's security. For this reason, China is actively involved in the work on the subject resolutions of this institution. Moreover, on the forum of other UN bodies, Beijing stands for a sovereign, independent Afghanistan that decides on its own future, is stable and free from terrorism.

For the PRC, the issue of Afghanistan's security is important in the context of regional cooperation structures and consultation channels. In 1996, when the Taliban took power in Afghanistan the so-called The Shanghai Five, including China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan was created. One of the most important reasons for its appointment was the threat posed by the Islamist regime of Afghanistan. In the following years, these countries expressed in joint statements their deep concern about the situation in Afghanistan, including in particular Taliban support for al-Qaeda. On June 15, 2001, at the summit in Shanghai, the cooperation of the countries was institutionalized through the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The organization was also joined by the neighboring countries of Afghanistan - Uzbekistan (2001), Pakistan (2017), and India

(2017).

Several security conventions have been developed within the SCO. At the inaugural summit in 2001, member states signed the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism (Shanghai Convention 2001), which formally entered into force on March 29, 2003. In the following year, on June 17, 2004, a permanent SCO body called Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was established in Tashkent. It focuses on combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Mainly it acts as a platform for the exchange of information between SCO members on organizations and persons involved in terrorism. Even turning the SCO into a military alliance was considered. However, it became much less likely when conflicted India and Pakistan gained full membership. It is worth noting that these countries, apart from the PRC, have the greatest influence on the situation in Afghanistan among Asian countries.

The SCO pursued a policy towards Afghanistan different from NATO. It did not engage militarily, but concentrated on diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian activities, which were to boost the peace process. Moreover, it underlined the leading role of the United Nations in Afghanistan in each area of action. SCO members are in favor of a terrorist-free, neutral Afghanistan, the people of which can choose their own regime, and which maintains proper relations with its neighbors. In 2006, the SCO established a special contact group which consulted with Afghanistan's authorities' security and development issues. In March 2009 the SCO Special Conference on Afghanistan was held in Moscow, where issued the SCO-Afghanistan Action Plan which called for joint operations in combating terrorism and organized crime, including drug trafficking (Jurełczyk, Nicharapova 2020, 168). At the SCO summit in Beijing on June 6, 2012, Afghanistan was granted the observer status in the organization. Full membership in the SCO was to be possible after the stabilization of the country. The progressive destabilization of Afghanistan meant that the SCO countries took more and more active measures to strengthen Afghan security forces and counteract terrorism and drug smuggling from that country (Zhao 2012, 11). Officially, the members of SCO distanced themselves from the possibility of sending military contingents to Afghanistan, but unofficially they had to be ready for such a scenario as well. SCO aspires to become a key security organization in the region due to its political, economic, and military potential (Arduino 2017, 133). One of the manifestations of cooperation between SCO members in the field of security is the organization of increasingly larger joint military exercises, preparing partners to conduct joint peacekeeping missions. This does not change the fact that for China, tightening economic cooperation in the region is of key

importance within the SCO.

In October 2007, in Dushanbe, the SCO signed an agreement with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) established on the initiative of Russia<sup>2</sup>. It concerned cooperation in the field of security, combating terrorism, crime, and illegal drug trafficking. Within these areas of cooperation, Afghanistan is of particular interest as it is the main exporter of instability in the region. The main axis of cooperation within the SCO and between SCO and CSTO is, in turn, the relations of the great powers - China and Russia. The security vacuum that emerged after ISAF's withdrawal from Afghanistan forced its neighbors to intensify regional cooperation to ensure the security of state borders and protection against international terrorism. Nevertheless, neither the SCO nor the CSTO were able to fill this vacuum (Arduino 2017, 219).

The PRC is also involved in other forms of multilateral cooperation for the security of Afghanistan. On November 2, 2011, a regional forum for the security of Afghanistan called the Heart of Asia was established. Due to the place of the founding meeting, it is commonly known as the Istanbul Process. Formally, the Heart of Asia is an intergovernmental organization at the ministerial level, which includes 14 states of the continent<sup>3</sup>. It is based on three pillars, namely political consultation, confidence-building measures and cooperation with regional organizations (Heart of Asia). This organization primarily tries to achieve national reconciliation between the Afghans. However, the issues discussed during the meetings are very diverse and include, among others, extremism and terrorism, drug smuggling, migration, poverty, development cooperation and others. The ministers of the member states of the Istanbul Process hold talks at annual meetings, the fourth of which took place on October 21, 2014, in Beijing.

The PRC also participates in the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, which includes representatives of the United States, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The group met for the first time in June 2015. Talks in this configuration faced numerous barriers. The main factor was the reluctance of the Taliban to engage in talks. Moreover, there were serious animosities between the representatives of Kabul and Islamabad. Relations between the states are burdened by, among other things, many years of territorial dispute and the Pakistani Pashtun's efforts to gain independence. There were also

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2 Apart from Russia, CSTO members are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

3 The participants in the Istanbul Process are Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and the United Arab Emirates.

additional problems, including accusations by Pakistan against Afghanistan of not acting to contain Taliban attacks from its territory (Wong, Jolly 2016). There is also mutual distrust between China and the United States due to multiple conflicting regional and global interests. It is worth emphasizing, however, that as part of the initiative, Beijing has formally decided for the first time to cooperate with Washington for the security of Afghanistan. Previously, the PRC avoided any cooperation with the US in this regard, so as not to antagonize Islamic extremist groups. China and Pakistan present much closer positions, but there are also various misunderstandings between them (Putz 2017).

The CCP leadership realizes that Pakistan is the key to a more important role for the PRC in South Asia. Its leaders also know that the country and the organizations located on its territory have a particular impact on the situation in Afghanistan. For this reason, the tripartite China-Afghanistan-Pakistan dialogue initiative has been operating since 2012. Islamabad put pressure on Kabul to rely more on Beijing during the US withdrawal from Afghanistan (Crane, Greenfield 2014, 308). However, the authorities in Kabul were indignant that Islamabad, with Beijing's backing, was trying to interfere excessively in its internal affairs (Wong, Jolly 2016). In 2011, the Pakistani authorities asked the PRC to take over the role of the US in Afghanistan and to provide significant support also for themselves, so that they could become independent of American aid (Cordesman, Hess 2014, 253). However, relations between China and Pakistan are complicated. Along with the rise in economic involvement in Afghanistan, China tried to use Pakistan to stabilize the country (Lanteigne 2016, 205). Beijing hoped for Islamabad to implement its guidelines on Afghanistan, but there were a number of obstacles in the way. One of them is the lack of control by the Pakistani authorities over domestic extremist groups (Gartenstein-Ross, Trombly, Barr, 2014, 15). This is particularly problematic for China, as Uyghur fighters are trained in Pakistan and enter China both via Pakistan and via Afghanistan. China has tried to convince Afghanistan and Pakistan to seek common security interests, particularly in defense against the threat of illegal fighters (Ali 2015, 18).

The PRC also initiated bilateral cooperation on Afghanistan with India - its main competitor from South Asia. Beijing was unfavorable towards the tightening strategic cooperation between Afghanistan and India. This was due to both the serious tensions in political relations between China and India, and the economic rivalry in Afghanistan. China and India entered the dialogue on Afghanistan for the first time in April 2013. The parties involved in the talks diplomatically described it as constructive and fruitful

(Zafar, Upadhyay 2016, 241). Kabul saw China as a more important partner than India (Gajda 2015, 2). Nevertheless, large investments, relatively high development aid, and supplies of military equipment from India were of great importance for Afghanistan (Miglani 2016). Indo-Afghan cooperation raised even more serious anxiety in Pakistan, a friend of China. Islamabad feared that the country's growing ties could weaken its position in the conflict with India over Kashmir. Indo-Afghan relations exacerbated tensions in Afghan-Pakistani relations. First of all, Afghanistan accused Pakistan of blocking the transit of goods imported and exported to India through its territory (Wong, Jolly 2016). For these reasons, China finds itself in a delicate position when talking to India about the security of Afghanistan.

The PRC also participates in other configurations of cooperation with Asian countries, in which it undertakes talks for the stabilization of Afghanistan and, more broadly, South Asia and Central Asia. Among such initiatives, it is worth mentioning the cooperation in the China-India-Russia triangle. In January 2014, a meeting of representatives of these countries was held in Beijing. China also participates in consultations in a tripartite format with Russia and Pakistan. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build the New Silk Road from China to Europe, presented by President Xi in September 2013, was also aimed at stabilizing these parts of Asia. One of the important consequences of this initiative is to strengthen the economic cooperation of Asian countries by developing a communication network. China's generous capital offer (the total cost of the project may reach up to \$ 100 billion) is to contribute to increasing the stability of the countries in the region, including by intensifying their efforts to combat extremism and terrorism to ensure the security of the project. This, in turn, could translate into greater pressure from these countries on Afghanistan.

The above configurations show that the PRC is ready for consultations and cooperation with all countries that have an impact on the situation in Afghanistan. This also applies to countries with which it has different or even conflicting interests (Szcudlik-Tatar 2014, 5-6). However, this does not automatically mean that China is an unequivocally constructive actor in the region. It should be emphasized that it undertakes these initiatives primarily in order to protect its own interests. One of the motives behind Beijing's building such diverse cooperation platforms is to try to prevent regional integration that would disregard or be directed against its interests. An example of such cooperation, which is unfavorable for China, is the tightening strategic triangle on the US-India-East Asia line. Beijing is aware that Washington's initiative is aimed at balancing the growth of China's power in Asia (Ali 2015, 122).

## Final Remarks

As China's power grows, so does the scope of its interests. Afghanistan is located at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia strategically important to China. Due to its geographic proximity, the destabilization of these regions may have far more serious consequences for China than for the remote United States. Unlike the US and NATO, however, China has not decided to send its armed forces to Afghanistan. It promotes security in Afghanistan using soft methods, and its main motive is its own security and development. Beijing assumed that the acceleration of development and economic cooperation with Afghanistan was to be translated into the stabilization of its security. Afghanistan has significant deposits of natural resources that potentially give the PRC an opportunity to diversify its supplies. For this reason, China made investments aimed at the extraction of Afghan raw materials, with minimal efforts to maintain security of the country. The PRC has been developing economic cooperation with Afghanistan, based on a model previously tested in Africa and Latin America. It assumes gaining political influence through economic cooperation, including investment, while abstaining from interfering in internal affairs. Within the model, internal stability and economic prosperity are much more important than civil liberties. Apart from significant capital investment in the mining sector in Afghanistan, however, China's contribution to its development has been limited. This shows a relatively low level of aid funds provided, as well as implemented infrastructure projects.

Beijing hoped for the success of the so-called The Kabul Process, i.e., the effective takeover from NATO by the Afghan government of full responsibility for administering and maintaining security in the country. The hopes of the international community for China to take over a more serious part of the political and military responsibility for the security of Afghanistan were, however, an illusion. Beijing did not want to be identified with the NATO mission in Afghanistan and to save the West from Afghan fire. The Kabul Process has proved ineffective for a number of reasons. Partly because the ANSF were not adequately prepared to protect citizens. Therefore, the PRC also joined the process of their training, albeit to a limited extent.

Beijing had been conducting an intensified, mainly multilateral, political dialogue for the security of Afghanistan, but without visible successes. The regaining of power by the Taliban completely changed the circumstances of China's cooperation with Afghanistan. The possibility of implementing investments in the mining sector and commercial cooperation are questioned. More importantly, the implementation of the flagship BRI project has been

put at risk, as it is to pass in the vicinity of Afghanistan, including through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), in which China have invested about \$ 60 billion and through the countries of Central Asia. China is equally concerned about the possible increase in the power of extremist and terrorist groups in the region.

After the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan, China needs to play a more active role in the region to protect its economic interests. It cannot be ruled out that in the distant future, powers such as China and India, and perhaps even Russia, will play a key international role in the security, stability, and development of Afghanistan. However, it can be assumed that China will continue to avoid military involvement, including in the form of anti-terrorist operations against Uyghur separatists hiding in that country. However, Beijing will act decisively to prevent terrorists from al-Qaeda, ISIS, ETIM, and other organizations from entering Chinese territory from Afghanistan.

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the paper is to present and evaluate the involvement of the People's Republic of China in stabilizing the security of Afghanistan during the democratic transition. China's efforts to secure Afghanistan were very limited as it did not want to support the US position in the country and antagonize extremist groupings. Its relations with Afghanistan were focused on economic issues, which resulted from its own goals and interests. China hoped that the intensified investments and trade, and thus economic growth, would positively translate into the stability and security of Afghanistan.

**KEYWORDS**

Afghanistan; People's Republic of China; Security; Stability.

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