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CfP "Regional Integration and Disintegration" contribution:

China in Afghanistan - sicherheitspolitische Aspekte des Seidenstraßenprojekts

von

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Abstract

Das 2013 angekündigte Seidenstraßenprojekt der chinesischen Regierung „One Belt, One Road“ (OBOR) verspricht neue wirtschaftliche Wachstumsimpulse für die über 60 betroffenen Länder. Besonders für Zentralasien und Afghanistan bietet OBOR die Möglichkeit, Anschluss an Wirtschaftsmächte zu bekommen und in die Wertschöpfungsketten zwischen Europa und Asien integriert zu werden.

Von besonderem strategischen Interesse für die Volksrepublik ist Afghanistan. Geopolitisch gesehen sieht China in Afghanistan einen schwierigen Nachbarn, denn das Land ist durch den anhaltenden Krieg gegen die Taliban geschwächt und darüber hinaus zentraler Ort für einige radikale Islamistenbewegungen, die potenziell Einfluss auf die uighurischen Unabhängigkeitsbestrebungen in Xinjiang haben könnten. Das vorliegende Papier untersucht Chinas Gesamtstrategie im Zuge der Umsetzung von OBOR und die sicherheitspolitischen Aspekte der Sino-Afghanischen Beziehungen.

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1. Introduction
Throughout the last three decades, after the Reform and Opening-up Policy was adopted, China has developed into one of the most powerful economies in the world. In the context of its changing economic strategy, that no longer puts its focus on manufacturing and export but domestic consumption, finance and investment, Chinese President Xi Jinping has announced “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) (Tian, 2016) in 2013, an initiative that aims at reviving and extending the traditional Silk Road. The project, that will be funded with a total sum of over one trillion US Dollars by the Chinese government and includes more than 60 countries, aims at constructing a land and maritime bridge between Asia, Africa and Europe. This implies large-scale investments in logistics, infrastructure and the development of new markets and business opportunities. For countries that are burdened with a weak economic system or difficult political situations, cooperation in the frame of OBOR and regional integration could be a step towards stabilisation. Afghanistan is a very interesting case to look at since its economy and social system is severely destabilised and it is conflicted with terrorism and Islamic extremism. For not only being included in the OBOR strategy but also as a neighbouring state to the Chinese, Afghanistan thus must be considered at a security level, too. In analysing China’s overall strategy towards Afghanistan, the following essay initially states the main reasons for which Afghanistan is important to China and then describes the Chinese economic, political and security strategy towards Afghanistan. Furthermore, it discusses Sino-US relations regarding Afghanistan, that becomes even more relevant when looking at the planned withdrawal of US troops.

2. Sino-Afghan economic relations
Afghanistan’s mountainous Wakhan Corridor and the Chinese Province Xinjiang meet at a border of 76 km length (CIA, 2016). In ancient times, merchants traded fruits and tea along the traditional Silk Road (Encyclopedia Iranica, 2011), shaping prosperous economic relations. Afghanistan’s more current history, however, is marked with a long period of war and economic and political instability. The GDP remained at a low growth rate of 1.5 percent, high levels of inflation, and unemployment. It has a negative trade balance of 5.65 billion US Dollars, due to high dependence on imports, while exports remain low. More than one third of Afghanistan’s population lives below the poverty line and the country’s main source of income continues to be international funding, which financed 90 percent of its development budget in 2015. Although China closed the border to Afghanistan
in the 1950s due to domestic security risks in Xinjiang province (Segal, 1981), China remained one of the key trading partners of Afghanistan. Next to the import of Chinese products, China has two major licenses in Afghanistan: firstly, for the mining of the biggest Afghan copper deposit Mes Aynak, that China Metallicurgical Group bought in 2007 for over three billion Dollars (Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, kein Datum) (South China Morning Post, 2014) and secondly, for oildrilling, that China National Petroleum Corp. won in 2011. According to the International Monetary Fund Regional Economic Outlook report on the Middle East and Central Asia (International Monetary Fund, 2016), China is estimated to commit 100 million Dollars in OBOR investments in Afghanistan.

3. Chinese interests and strategies in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is important to China for three main reasons: Afghanistan is rich in (1) natural resources, especially hydrocarbons (The World Bank, 2016), which could help China avoid using vulnerable routes in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, also reducing dependency on Russia. Afghanistan could profit from a cooperation, since the Chinese could provide the needed infrastructure to make natural resources more accessible.

Afghanistan’s (2) central location allows it to play a key role within OBOR as a land bridge linking China to Central and South Asia as well as to the Middle East by railways and highways. This makes Afghanistan a transit hub and an essential puzzle piece to regional integration. In September 2016, China inaugurated the first cargo train that transports Chinese commodities and Afghan copper between China’s east coast and Hairatan in northern Afghanistan. The Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce & Industries expects that the project, which reduces the transport time, “will greatly reduce Chinese commodities’ prices and [...] Afghanistan’s $600 million export industry - including shipments of saffron, marble, lapis lazuli and high-quality Kurk wool - will see a considerable increase following the opening of the rail route” (Najafizada, 2016).

Furthermore, Afghanistan’s geopolitical situation is critical to the Chinese (3) security strategy. Pan Guang, a Chinese analyst, identifies the reasons with respect to terrorist activities and Islamic extremism:

‘Firstly, Afghanistan was the first main battlefield for the war on terrorism after 9/11. If the anti-terror war in Afghanistan cannot achieve a thorough victory, terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Central Asia may stage a comeback at any time [...] Secondly, now that the leading core of al-Qaeda is still very active between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and almost all the key figures of
Central Asian terrorist groups have grown up from the Jihad in Afghanistan. Afghanistan remains the spiritual pillar of terrorism. Thirdly, the production and transaction of narcotics in Afghanistan have provided the terrorist groups in Central Asia with significant funds. (Andrew Scobell, Ely Ratner, Michael Beckley 2014)

For fear of strengthened terrorist or Islamic extremist movements might spread to its peripheral province Xinjiang, China is seeking multilateral cooperation, especially with regional governments and powers in Central and South Asia. This resulted in the foundation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 that functions as a dialogue and political consultation platform for its members China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, India and Pakistan. The SCO provides political consultation, financial support, weaponry and military training. Although China invests in security cooperation, it maintains its non-intervening approach and does not provide direct military support on the ground (Haas, 2014). To stay in good terms with the Afghan government as well as other regional actors, China prevents the image of a foreign occupational threat and prefers to engage in peace building processes and a soft policy that underlines a friendly neighbourhood and harmonious world (Scobell, Ratner, & Beckley, 2014).

**4. Sino-US relations**

The SCO refuses to participate in the NATO’s ISAF mission and provide troops on the ground. China’s motivation for maintaining its non-military and non-intervening approach is to stay a secondary target behind the USA for terrorist or Islamic extremist attacks (Scobell, Ratner, & Beckley, 2014). The US therefore blames China for “free-riding” on its extraordinary security commitments and those of the NATO allies. It would be preferable for both sides to concentrate on their common interests, that is to stabilise Afghanistan and to contain terrorism and narcotics. On the one hand, China is in favour of the NATO presence in Afghanistan as a counter weight to terrorism, Islamic extremism and drug trafficking. On the other hand, the US should accept the fact that China’s economic activity in Afghanistan can provide a higher level of economic and social stability (Scobell, Ratner, & Beckley, 2014). According to the circumstances, a security collaboration between the SCO and the NATO and a respective coordination of tasks could be considered.

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1. Here, it seems interesting, that Chinese investments in neighbouring states are far more than in Afghanistan (100 million US Dollars) itself. According to IMF estimations, 4.5 billion US Dollars of investment go to Pakistan and 31 billion US Dollars to Central Asian countries (International Monetary Fund, 2016).

2. Replaced by smaller mission „Resolute Support“ in January 2015
5. Conclusion

China enables Afghanistan to get out of economic isolation and provides significant opportunities for the land-locked and war-torn country in connecting with regional infrastructure networks and emerging as an important partner in regional energy markets. At the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan in May 2016, Deputy Foreign Minister Mr. Hekmat Khalil Karzai pointed out that

“If Afghanistan remains isolated we will remain a burden on the regional community. If Afghanistan does not emerge as an energy transit hub between Far East and Central South Asia, we face the risk that we never create positive mutual dependencies. If Afghanistan does not develop dry land ports along trade and transit corridors, many of the markets destinations we all wish to access will remain too far. Most importantly, unless the OBOR comes through Afghanistan, peace and prosperity will remain as a dream and conflict will continue to affect the entire region.”
(Recca, 2016)

In the short term, Kabul should consider working on small infrastructure and energy projects. It is important to re-establish a stable economic system and industries that provide jobs for the people. However, a fruitful collaboration is confronted with the problems “[...] that connectivity is still subject to a stabilisation of the security situation in Afghanistan [and] [...] that many projects will face questions of commercial viability” (Najafizada, 2016). Furthermore, Afghanistan cannot solely rely on economic opportunities based on Chinese investment and support. The country needs to take the initiative for further cooperation in the region to create a more balanced international relations structure. Cooperating with China and being part of OBOR, however, helps Afghanistan with regional integration and could be a way out of isolation. In the long run, it would be important to increase the high-tech manufacturing capacity to produce high value goods for export and benefit from the economic opportunities created by OBOR.

With regards to China’s security strategy, China is preparing for terrorist and Islamic extremist threat by closely cooperating with regional governments and powers in Central and South Asia around Afghanistan, which is considered to be the heart of the feared radical movements. The SCO provides consultative and financial support, weapons and military training, however to this point refused to take action on direct military terms. This is partly because military capacity and capability is considered still weak and partly because China is hesitant in cooperating with the US and NATO due to strategic reasons. It remains to be seen, whether the SCO and NATO will focus more on their common interests of a stable Afghanistan and the containment of terrorism, narcotics and collaborate in the future.


