

COMMON PERCEPTION OF CHINESE COOPERATION IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

In the article I will try to define Chinese macro-strategy in investing in Afghanistan. Then, analyzing data collected on the field with an interview, I will try to examine Afghan perception of Chinese presence. After data analysis I will try to establish if Chinese strategy is useful to the picture that China wants to show of its presence in Afghanistan and what are the possible correction for making it much efficient.

Keywords: Afghanistan, China, reconstruction, post-NATO intervention

Introduction:

China is strongly present in Afghanistan from 2002, just after the fall of *taleban*. China, without any military involvement either in ISAF or “Enduring Freedom “, took immediately part in a team of nation to rebuild Afghanistan. China participated to all the International meetings on Afghanistan (Bonn 2001, London 2006, Paris 2008, The Hague 2009, Bonn December 2011). China also hosted in Tianjin the Istanbul Ministerial Process, the major regional meeting between Afghanistan and its neighbors in 2014, assuming an higher profile in shaping the future of Afghanistan (Zhao, 2015).

China motivation in staying in Afghanistan can be considered through two possible interpretations. The first is the realistic interpretation (based on the assumption that China is attracted just by the Afghan resources), the second is security-leaded interpretation (improve Afghanistan security and disrupt terroristic groups linked with extremist groups operating in China to create a solid economic cooperation).

During my last mission in Afghanistan (March-October 2011) and thank to two of my collaborator that collected interviews for me (between September 2012 to December 2014) I realized a collection of Afghan perception of China intervention at various level (population, regional government, Kabul governmental). The interview submitted is composed by three simple and direct questions: What do you know about China presence

and initiatives in Afghanistan, do you think they are useful to Afghanistan too or just for China? What you think about Chinese presence: is it going to enrich Afghan and its population (in any way) or not? Do you think China presence in your country is it going to increase in future and you think is this a positive or negative factor? We submitted interview to a number (4873 subjects) of population in the provinces of: Herat, Kabul, Helmand, Badghis and Kandahar.

In the article I will try to explain the main motivations of China permanence in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and, analyzing the data collected on the field, assess if there is correspondence of analysis and what perceived from population. I will try to demonstrate if China joined its objectives with a positive perception of its soft power or a negative one and to delineate what could be the better adjustments to do to its staying in the area for better achieving its goal to maintain its soft-power picture. Afghan perception of China presence is fundamental for three main reasons. First of all Afghanistan is facing an intensive democratization process based also on ethnic integration. A negative perception of China presence could feed tension among ethnic groups, some of them more opened to integration with Chinese people, some of them are more narrow. A second motivation for which a positive image of China it's really important in country's future is that a negative picture could be used by extremist groups to strengthen their positions. Looking to China point of view we find the third reason for considering common Afghan perception of Chinese presence so important. China is basing its international policy on the soft-power concept of peaceful rise and to be seen as an hegemonic/imperialist power in a first impact scenario for international public opinion (as it is Afghanistan of post-NATO intervention) could have a really negative impact on its image. In some areas (as emerging from interview) China interest in resources exploitation and economy in general find the direct concurrence of Iran (strongly present in Herat and Farah provinces with FDI in particular) (Zonis, 2015). Soft-power field will probably where there will be major competition between Iran and China to obtain particular relations with Afghan economy of post-war period.

In my analysis I will try to assess if China presence in Afghanistan is really based on soft-power, and explain in which cases this is successful and in which not. I will try as well to define what could be better improvements for this strategy and so what we should expect from PRC on the next years.

I.

At the end of military intervention in Afghanistan China has become the third country for volume of investments. Since 2010 China started to increase investment in Afghanistan. In 2013 China presence in Afghanistan

can be assessed in a total of: 2,9 billion of USD invested in mineral sources extraction and 400 million of USD invested in energy production (mainly exported to China)^{viii} China's most notable efforts include a \$3.5 billion project for the development of the Aynak copper mine in Logar Province and all the infrastructures (transport and electricity-generating facilities) (Heritage Foundation, 2015). That is the largest foreign direct investment in Afghanistan's history. Investments in mines have been realized under the aegis of Afghan Ministry of Mines Wahidullah Shaharani. China's biggest part of investments are concentrated in mines and facilities regarding them.

By the 2015 NATO withdraw from Afghanistan it has almost completed but Afghanistan is still not self-sufficient and, as reminded by Afghan officials in various occasions as President Ashraf Ghani did on 18 September 2014. Afghanistan also signed on 30 September 2014 for the permanence of 9800 US soldiers and 2000 NATO soldiers.

China presence can be considered essentially through two factors: realistic, and based on security motivation.

The first factor is motivated by the China needs of power and natural resources. This factor is especially highlighted by China investments in mines and oil plant. Afghanistan has abundant non-fuel mineral resources, including a wide variety of minerals ranging from copper, iron, and sulfur to bauxite, lithium and gold. China invested in copper mines like Mes Aynak in Logar Province and Aybak in Samangan and is looking for new, available resources sites (Downs 2013).

The second factor of PRC presence in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is to create economic and political conditions to avoid a future reborn of an extremist government (like *Taliban*) in Afghanistan. Political stability will be required for economic stability of Afghanistan and would give to China a more reliable partner in economic relationships. In effect China and Afghanistan border for few kilometers but that border has been a chokepoint for passage of Islamic extremists (Ramannullah, 2010). China presence in Afghanistan is largely motivated by Chinese Communist Party concern over the stability of Xinjiang Region. That region, in Turkic definition named "East Turkestan" is the biggest threat to the stability of China coming from inside, while Afghanistan can be considered as the most impellent threat from outside. During *taleban* regime Afghanistan became a reliable safe haven for extremist coming from Xinjiang and a base for "East Turkestan" organizations. The *Taliban* were the spiritual agitator and material supplier for "East Turkestan" extremists. There are not yet certain indicators on how many extremist fled from China to Afghanistan to find a safe haven or to be trained and to fight in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 and from 2001 to current day but they seems to be around thousands. So, as natural, any kind of interpretation has to take in consideration economic

motivations: first one as just resources exploitation or (second one) as the try to build a stable and reliable economy to cooperate with. The last interpretation is also the broader one and provide a more complete view of Chinese policy. In fact, in this vision China considers primarily the importance of its presence in Afghanistan as a stabilizing element to keep on exploit afghan mineral sources and, at the same time, is aware that giving chances for an economic development to a friendly government is going to reduce extremist fall-out in the country.

So the second explanation, sustained also by an amount of bibliography (Gries, 2015, Keller & Rawsky, 2015, Yuan, 1999, Breslin, 2010, World Bank 2010) is the most complete and probably the best to be taken in account trying to examine the perception of Chinese permanence in the area. Mechanism of increasing the presence and increment investments motivating them with a safety explanation too is important also in the building of Chinese smart power. China is asserting in its international relations to be a power in a 和平 发展 (peaceful development) starting from Hu Jintao Era. All the new Chinese Diplomacy is based on that concept of Peaceful Power and so it's really important for PRC that every kind of Chinese foreign action is justified with peaceful motivations.

Following this interpretation of Chinese behavior in the Islamic Republic is deeply linked to Afghan perception of China presence. In fact, as explained in the introduction, a bad perception of Chinese presence by Afghans could increase the risk of worsening the governance and increase extremism. A negative view of China behavior in a first media impact situation as post-NATO Afghanistan is could also seriously damage the Chinese peaceful power general picture (Wo-Lap Lam, 2010).

I collected data during my last ISAF mission deployment in 2011 and thank to some my colleagues employed in Afghanistan in 2012, 2013 and 2014. We started to interview people from September 2011 (when Chinese presence in Afghanistan was already shaped) until 2015.

We managed to interview three officials from Kabul government, 13 people from Regional Government of Herat and 4873 subjects from population of the following provinces: Herat, Kabul, Helmand, Badghis and Kandahar. For clear cultural reasons around 90% of interviewed people were men. The difficulties that I faced in the field to interview women were bypassed (when it was possible), asking the elder representing the community or to a relative to be means of communication between female interviewed and interpreter. Shortage of women interviewed is mitigated from the not primary role that they have in Afghan political world. Unfortunately in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan women have still not a substantial equality of rights with men and in terms of policy and public opinion influence men's point of view is much more relevant.

For the officials interviewed (central and regional governments) out of a total of 16, six were from Hizb-ut Tahrir Party (a really strong Islamic party), two represented the Wahadat Islami (another Islamic semi-radical force), four from Jumhuri Afghanistan (a Republican moderate forces) and four (in Herat provincial government), were part of regional movement. I tried to give the larger picture I could of the various movements, taking in account difficulties and obstacles in interviewing people.

Ethnic issue is also a first importance aspect, Afghan ethnic composition is based in two main groups: Pashtun (43% of population) and Tajik (around 16%), five less numerous (Hazara, Uzbek, Aymak, Turkmen, Baloch) and a large number of minorities (Pashai, Nuristani, Arabs, Pamiri ecc.). Traditionally Pashtun, a fierce population based on tribal uses and particular code of behavior (*pashtunwali*), are against ethnic integration and foreign presence is often seen as an interference in their tribal world. From Pashtun we should expect a negative judge on Chinese presence. Instead Tajik are more opened to integration and developed a more inclusive way of life, e.g. percentage of Tajik employed in State administration is higher compared to Pashtun. In my sample for interview I tried to respect ethnic percentage but that was possible just for Herat and Kabul (in the other areas, being already a good result to be able to interview people, I chose to take in consideration all the data collected).

As a general consideration, sample interviewed are not proportionally corresponding to ethnic/genre of Afghan people composition but, considering the particular difficulty of the area I decided to elaborate them in any case.

For all the interviewed people we proposed just three simple questions:

1) What do you know about China presence and initiatives in Afghanistan, do you think they are useful to Afghanistan too or just for China?

2)What you think about Chinese presence: is it going to enrich Afghan and its population (in any way) or not?

3)Do you think China presence in your country is it going to increase in future and you think is this a positive or negative factor?

I will examine first the answers given by officials from Kabul central government.

China presence and initiatives in Afghanistan: do you think they are useful to Afghanistan too or just for China?	Useful for both: 3	Useful just for China: 0	
Chinese presence: is it going to enrich Afghan and its population (in any way) or not?	Enrich, especially economically: 3	No: 0	
China presence in your country is it going to increase in future and you think is this a positive or negative factor?	Yes, positive: 2	No: 0	No, negative: 1

Data referred to officials from Central Government of Kabul interviewed on the field in 2011-2015.

In examining first and second part of data we must take in account the political faction and the corruption problems emerged in Afghanistan especially in regional governments. Majority of interviewed are part of Islamic parties this could influence in a negative way the judgement of Chinese presence (as China is formally a communist state), despite of this the officials opinion is strongly positive. We should consider even corruption problem. Corruption, as recognized from Afghan government itself it's one of the biggest problem of Afghan governance. Corruption in the country has really become impressive especially from 2010. In every kind of interpretation of officials declaration we should take in account that people interviewed could be involved in bribery linked to concession to Chinese Companies. Corruption could influence decision of conceding sources exploitation to China and the opinion about Chinese presence in the area. Anyhow the article it is not really interested in motivation of opinion released but in understanding what is the real opinion of Afghan people about Chinese presence (Gombert, Binnendijk and Lin, 2014) .

The officials opinion of Chinese activities in the country is really positive and 2 of them are already thinking that China investments are going to increase in the nearest future and they hope so for Afghan economy. This particular situation could be result of a corrupt regime, but it's anyway a good result for Chinese image and soft-power.

Second part of data concerns regional governments, they are really partial because we were able to collect data just from Herat region (for logistic and security reasons).

China presence and initiatives in Afghanistan: do you think they are useful to Afghanistan too or just for China?	Useful for both: 11	Useful just for China: 2	
Chinese presence: is it going to enrich Afghan and its population (in any way) or not?	Enrich, especially economically: 9	No: 4	
China presence in your country is it going to increase in future and you think is this a positive or negative factor?	Yes, positive: 8	No, positive: 1	No, negative: 4

Data referred to officials from Regional Government of Herat interviewed on the field in 2011-2015.

Data shown in the second table start to differentiate the view of Chinese presence, in particular we can notice this from answers to the second question. Four officials out of 13 from Herat Government think that economic investment of PRC in Afghanistan they are not going to enrich their country, at least economically. Some of them think that Chinese presence is a good deterrence for insurgency or a less incumbent to NATO forces, but they don't think is an economical positive factor in this moment. This point is particularly important by the fact that has emerged from officials of a Regional Government. The fact could imply that Regional Governments are less touched by corruption related problems than Central regarding resources allocation and exploitation. This could happen because mines and mineral resources exploitation are generally allocated at Central political level by Ministry of Mines. A second cause for the slightly worse opinion of China presence could be the Iran influence in Herat area. Iran borders Afghanistan for 940 km, touching provinces of Herat, Farah and Nimruz. Iran is really involved in Afghanistan reconstruction and strongly interested in post-war Afghanistan economy, either for economical motivations and for religious/cultural motivations (Zonis, 2015). In fact Shi'a religion watch with a particular attention Afghanistan and will try to influence the new Islamic Republic particularly to avoid dangerous Sunni manifestation like Arab influence and *taleban* phenomenon. Iran invested in realizing an hospital in Herat and a power plant in Farah and both population gather economic advantages from borders exchanges. Iran, after the end of Iran-Pakistan pipeline project in 2013-2014 (for which project invested an huge amount of economic resources), has tried with its influence, to colder

the project for TAPI pipeline, a concurrent pipeline supposed to cross Afghanistan starting from Turkestan for proceeding in Pakistan and India.

While Iran is trying to pose obstacles to TAPI project China is strongly sustaining it. In fact China is trying to insert in the project a branch heading to its hub port in Pakistan (Gwadar) and it's also supporting it's special ally Pakistan. Actually Beijing has a special alliance with Islamabad lasting from 1951, renewed through the years and renewed as Nawaz Sharif was elected as Prime Minister in 2013 (Magnani, 2012). So we can't avoid to consider confrontation of Pakistan (Sunni Islamic Republic) with Iran (Islamic Shi'a Republic and stronghold of Shi'a), and, in doing this consider that China position will probably be always supporting Pakistan (Ebinger, 2015). Pakistan government needs a moderate government in Afghanistan, preferably with a majority of Pashtun in administrative charges. First condition is necessary to have a safe neighbor with a good economy to cooperate with. While second aspect would be best option to create stability and conditions of governance in the Northern territories named Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). These regions (inhabited by fierce Pashtun tribes) are nominally controlled by Pakistan, but ruled through a tribal system (similar to *pashtunwali*) by Pashtun, and frontier line is not a real border but much more a communication area between Pashtun populations. To have a moderate and friendly Pashtun government in Afghanistan would mean for Pakistan to have a better control of its FATA (Shah, Busha, 2015). For these motivations China and Iran are at the present concurrent with their presence in Afghanistan and, again, one of the better strategy to win the game can be convincing Afghan population of their more friendly role (compared to the other).

When we pass to take in exams data collected from population of Herat we have a bigger amount of people interviewed and in these cases I decide to register also the number of people that didn't want to answers to one or more questions.

China presence and initiatives in Afghanistan: do you think they are useful to Afghanistan too or just for China?	Useful for both: 427	Useful just for China: 516		Prefer not to answer: 301
Chinese presence: is it going to enrich Afghan and its population (in any way) or	Enrich, especially economically: 329	No: 563		Prefer not to answer: 352

not?				
China presence in your country is it going to increase in future and you think is this a positive or negative factor?	Yes, positive: 212	No, positive: 227	No, negative: 124	Yes, negative: 363 Prefer not to answer: 318

Data referred to Herat province population interviewed on the field in 2011-2015.

Total number of Afghans interviewed in Herat province is 1244, a lot of them didn't want to answer to one or more questions giving various motivations. Percentage of people refusing to answer is around 25%, common population is still too influenced by the fear of insurgents to answer freely to the question and in some cases ignore completely the subject. Second case happens in Herat province because Chinese presence is really weak compared to provinces as Kabul or Mazar I Sharif. As shown from various indicators, Herat province there is a stronger presence of Iranian enterprises than Chinese enterprises (Committee on Foreign Relations US Senate, 2013). Anyhow Herat population examined shows a less positive vision of Chinese presence respect to the officials point of view and we can see that more than 50% consider it a negative factor or at least useless from the economic point of view. It should be highlighted in particular the answer on the fifth column of the third question: 363 Afghans out of 1244 interviewed in Herat province believe that Chinese presence is going to increase in future and see this as a negative factor.

After Herat I will examine data collected from population of Kabul: the capital.

China presence and initiatives in Afghanistan: do you think they are useful to Afghanistan too or just for China?	Useful for both: 473	Useful just for China: 299		Prefer not to answer: 155
Chinese presence: is it going to enrich Afghan and its population (in any way) or not?	Enrich, especially economically: 449	No: 237		Prefer not to answer: 241
China presence in your country	Yes, positive: 374	No, positive: 137	No, negative: 216	Yes, negative: 96

is it going to increase in future and you think is this a positive or negative factor?				Prefer not to answer: 104
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Data referred to Kabul province population interviewed on the field in 2011-2015.

In Kabul province population interviewed is more supportive of China and Chinese initiatives in Afghanistan, in fact we can highlight the positive vision of a future bigger involvement of China in the area for 354 people out of 927 interviewed. Near the capital population can express more freely their opinions without fearing insurgents threatening and we can deduce this from fact that just 17% of population interviewed in Kabul province prefer not to answer. Better vision of China presence and more supportive attitude to Chinese investments can be assessed as a result of a better knowledge of Chinese presence. In fact Chinese presence in Kabul is one of the biggest in Afghanistan due to the mineral complex of Mes Aynak. Probably we can deduce (without prejudice) that a great part of negative perception of Chinese perception is due to scarce knowledge of their effective actions in Afghanistan.

Then we can examine data coming from Helmand province, one of the most troubled from 2010 to current days.

China presence and initiatives in Afghanistan: do you think they are useful to Afghanistan too or just for China?	Useful for both: 403	Useful just for China: 251		Prefer not to answer: 391
Chinese presence: is it going to enrich Afghan and its population (in any way) or not?	Enrich, especially economically: 417	No: 237		Prefer not to answer: 391
China presence in your country is it going to increase in future and you think is this a positive or negative factor?	Yes, positive: 326	No, positive: 128	No, negative: 137	Yes, negative: 70 Prefer not to answer: 384

Data referred to Helmand province population interviewed on the field in 2011-2015.

In the Helmand province, place of one of the strongest insurgent presence from 2010 to current days, we find a percentage of people refusing to answer running around 37%. Even if population is feared of contact with western people there is a good consideration of Chinese presence, e.g. the answer to the question “Chinese presence: is it going to enrich Afghan and its population (in any way) or not?” for 427 people is “Yes, especially economically”, 391 refuse to answer and just 237 say “No”. Among people interviewed there is a good perception of Chinese investments and investors especially if compared to Herat province. In particular Chinese presence is seen as a good economical factor for helping the Afghan development.

We can find data similar in Badghis, a poor province located in Northeastern part of Afghanistan (North of Herat).

China presence and initiatives in Afghanistan: do you think they are useful to Afghanistan too or just for China?	Useful for both: 396	Useful just for China: 281		Prefer not to answer: 301
Chinese presence: is it going to enrich Afghan and its population (in any way) or not?	Enrich, especially economically: 403	No: 274		Prefer not to answer: 301
China presence in your country is it going to increase in future and you think is this a positive or negative factor?	Yes, positive: 377	No, positive: 117	No, negative: 133	Yes, negative: 50 Prefer not to answer: 301

Data referred to Badghis province population interviewed on the field in 2011-2015.

Data collected in Badghis are really similar to those of Helmand apart from people refusing to answer (that are less: around 30%). We could interpret this tendency noting that the province is far away Iranian influence (compared to Herat) even if there aren't any mines in the region and Chinese influence is limited to commerce of goods (cars and other). In general in Badghis too there is a good consideration of Chinese presence and for example 403 people out of 978 thinks that Chinese presence is positive and it is going to enrich the country.

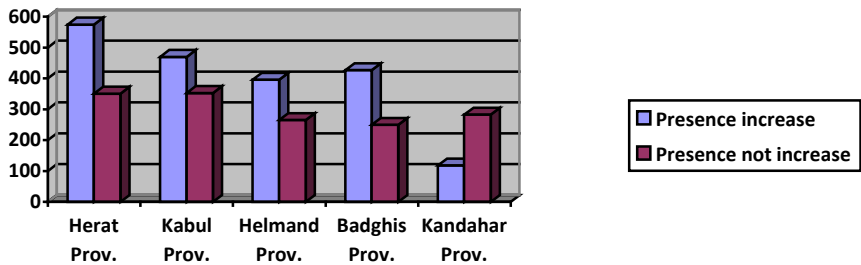
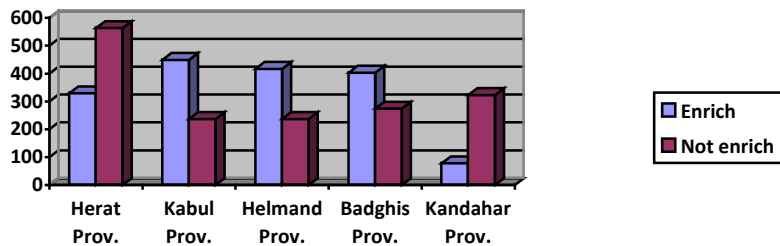
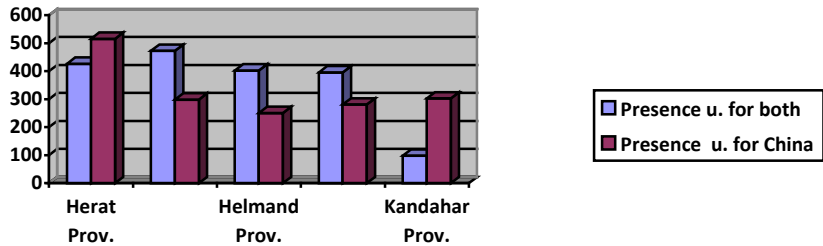
At the end we can check data coming from Kandahar province, in the South of the country.

China presence and initiatives in Afghanistan: do you think they are useful to Afghanistan too or just for China?	Useful for both: 98	Useful just for China: 303		Prefer not to answer: 278
Chinese presence: is it going to enrich Afghan and its population (in any way) or not?	Enrich, especially economically: 78	No: 323		Prefer not to answer: 278
China presence in your country is it going to increase in future and you think is this a positive or negative factor?	Yes, positive: 75	No, positive: 151	No, negative: 132	Yes, negative: 43 Prefer not to answer: 278

Data referred to Kandahar province population interviewed on the field in 2011-2015.

In this case we witness a complete falling of trust in Chinese investments and presence. First of all we have to preface that 40% of people interviewed prefer not to answer: an huge number, huge especially when compared to other provinces. Fear manifested by population is probably caused by the historical role of Kandahar as an insurgency strong point. Mistrust of Chinese influence takes common people interviewed to declare in 323 (out of 679 interviewed and 278 refusing to answer) that China is investing in Afghanistan just for its proper benefit (they are 80% of people answering to the question). There is an enormous diffidence toward China and Chinese policy. In Kandahar province there aren't mines or other particular signs of Chinese presence but we can't explain with just this lack of knowledge the 80% of negative perception. Diffidence and mistrust have probably ethnic origin, in fact Kandahar is principally inhabited by Pashtuns. As explained above, Pashtuns are a fierce tribal population of this country, following Tajiks for percentage in Afghanistan have a really strong and narrow cultural system called *pashtunwali*. *Pashtunwali* code is really strict and probably it causes a scarce integration with foreign people, particularly, in this case, Chinese. In correspondence with Pashtun ethnic group we collected more negative data about Chinese involvement in Afghanistan.

With the same data I produced a series of three graphics (one for each question) which highlight immediately the differences among the five provinces (in term of people accepting to answer and positive/negative answers):



Analyzing data we saw a tendency to consider Chinese presence more positively in the higher classes: officials in Kabul and Herat provinces have a better opinion compared to common people. The scarcity of knowledge of Chinese reality could take less instructed people to the common error of considering China (a formally communist State) as directly linked to old USSR. We shouldn't forget the invasion of Afghanistan by a communist regime that occupied with violence the region from 1979 to 1989 and left it

in a Civil War. This can be one of the motivation for the difference of opinions in the different samples.

Assessing common people opinion in various provinces we noticed a vision becoming more and more good starting from provinces with scarce Chinese presence to provinces with a bigger amount of Chinese investments. For example we noticed a worse opinion in Herat (where there is a really low Chinese rate of investments) than in Kabul. This perception has been confirmed also during interviews: people not knowing Chinese initiative treated them with particular diffidence.

Conclusion:

This analysis of Chinese interests, policies, and Afghan perception in regard of the economic exploitation of Afghan sources needs a fundamental preface to better understand Běijīng behaviors. It is what discussed in first part of the article: Chinese motivations of presence in Afghanistan. China knows that its presence in Afghanistan is a stabilizing element to keep on exploit afghan mineral sources and, at the same time, is aware that giving chances for an economic development to a friendly government is going to reduce extremist fall-out in the future (Liu, 2002). Běijīng has positioned itself as supportive of Afghanistan's long-term stability and prosperity though essentially civilian and limited political, economic, and diplomatic assistance. It has also been careful to remain on good terms with the Kabul authorities without offending the Pashtuns.

China's interests and policies toward Afghanistan generally agreed with Islamabad's desire to improve relations with Kabul, and to prevent excessive U.S. pressure and incursions on Pakistani sovereignty. We have also to remind traditional friendship between China and Pakistan to maintain which both countries are always trying to have same policy in Central Asia (especially with Kabul).

To maintain this policy and its general foreign policy Běijīng needs to be seen as a peaceful power and to improve its soft power. So the perception of Chinese presence by Afghan people it is object of primary importance either to avoid future increase of political instability and to increase first Chinese foreign policy leverage: soft power.

Analyzing data on the one hand we have seen that good opinion on Chinese presence largely depends on knowledge that Afghan can have of Chinese investments and (naturally) from economic benefits that they can obtain (in fact in the areas nearer Chinese biggest facilities and installations opinion were more positive than in the others). On the other hand we notice that where there is scant knowledge of Chinese economic activity or a more narrow cultural system (like *pashtunwali*) we find a bad conception of Chinese policy. My main conclusions so is that to improve its influence in

stabilizing Afghanistan China needs to diversify its investments in type and in geographical location. Also could be really useful for China to work in spreading its culture among Afghans like it did in Pakistan.

For same motivations could be interested to conduct a research specifically on this aspect: “How knowledge of Chinese presence can influence positively Afghan perception of Chinese investments?”

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