

**Testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs**

**Sean R. Roberts, PhD  
Associate Professor of Practice  
Elliott School of International Affairs  
George Washington University**

**March 31, 2009**

Chairman Tierney and other members of the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak today at a critical time for U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. I believe we can all agree that the difficulties facing the United States in Afghanistan are daunting. As we approach the eighth anniversary of U.S. military engagement in the country, Afghanistan remains violent, unstable, corrupt, and a major source of both terrorists and opium. To address this situation, the Obama administration is pledging to step up U.S. involvement in the country both militarily and in terms of our civil reconstruction work, a strategy on which hinges the future of Afghanistan.

A part of the Obama administration's proposed strategy for Afghanistan as unveiled last week also includes the increased involvement of Russia, China, and the Central Asian states in reconstruction. In particular, President Obama noted in his press conference that he foresaw the establishment of a new contact group within the United Nations focused on Afghanistan and including these northern neighbors. Likewise, the Obama administration has been busy over the last two months trying to court the cooperation of the Central Asian states in its Afghanistan strategy, particularly with regards to the transport of supplies through Central Asian territory.

These are all welcome efforts, and I would argue that the cooperation of Central Asia, Russia, and China will be critical to success in Afghanistan over the long term. Furthermore, the situation in Afghanistan may actually prove to be an opportunity to work together with Russia and China in ways that the U.S. has rarely done, thus helping to open diplomatic avenues on other issues with these countries. Indeed, it is in the interests of Russia and China as well as of the Central Asian states to establish stability and peace in Afghanistan. All of these regional players would rather see Afghanistan as a location for viable investments and development instead of as a source of terrorism and opium. That being said, it is also important to recognize the limits of the cooperation that the U.S. can foster with these countries, particularly with Russia and China, and the obstacles that they, especially Russia, can create for the United States. As the recent decision by Kyrgyzstan to suspend the activities of the Manas Air Base used by coalition forces shows, Russia retains substantial influence in Central Asia and may undertake acts that hurt the common cause in Afghanistan merely in order to aggravate the United States.

In this context, it is critical that the U.S. engagement of Russia, China, and the Central Asian states on Afghanistan be realistic, cautious, and play to these countries' interests. In order to craft such a strategy, one must begin by looking more closely at each of these different players' interests in Afghanistan, both long-term and short-term. While Russia, China, and the Central Asian states share a common desire to limit the ability of terrorists to use Afghanistan as a base, they each fear different terrorist groups, and they each stand to benefit from a stable Afghanistan in different ways.

### *China*

Chinese officials will note that their primary interest in the reconstruction of Afghanistan is to prevent Uyghur separatists from using the country as a base for terrorism. Although the Chinese government appears to worry incessantly about Uyghur separatists, this particular concern with regards to Afghanistan is not entirely credible. The U.S. recognized several Uyghur organizations as terrorist groups within a year of September 11, 2001, presumably to win China's alliance in the war on terror. Subsequently, U.S. troops detained twenty-two Uyghurs found in Afghanistan early in the war, placing them in the Guantanamo detention facilities. Since that time, however, most specialists on the subject have questioned the validity of any serious Uyghur terrorist threat, let alone one based in Afghanistan.

Five of the Uyghurs originally detained in Guantanamo have been released to Albania cleared of all charges, and the remaining detainees have been cleared of the status of "enemy combatants" since September 2008. A U.S. court last year also ordered that the remaining Uyghur detainees should be released, but a stay has been placed on that order, presumably until the U.S. can figure out where to re-settle them. While last summer during the Olympics, the Chinese government claimed that there were threats of Uyghur terrorism organized by groups based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the circumstances surrounding those threats were murky at best and did not suggest the existence of a well-organized or well-armed Uyghur terrorist group. In the cases where violence allegedly occurred last summer, the weapons used appeared to be home-made, bringing into question the allegations of outside assistance, and the attacks themselves lacked the sophistication one associates with Al Qaeda or the Taliban.<sup>1</sup> In general, the evidence speaks against the existence of any real threat of Uyghur terrorism to the Chinese state, and, even if such a threat does exist, it does not appear to have support in Afghanistan now if it ever did.

That, however, does not mean that China is not interested in the establishment of a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. China recognizes that the Muslim Uyghur population in its northwest province of Xinjiang is dissatisfied with the Chinese state and continues, like the Tibetans, to desire sovereignty or at least a more substantive autonomy in their homeland. If Muslim militants remain active in Afghanistan, that could have an affect on

---

<sup>1</sup> See: Andrew Jacobs, *Ambush in China Raises Concerns as Olympics Near*, New York Times, August 5, 2008.

the dynamics in Xinjiang. Although this logic likely figures into China's desires for the future of Afghanistan, I would argue that it is secondary to economic concerns and, more specifically, China's continual quest for energy resources. In this sense, China's primary interests in Afghanistan should be viewed from the perspective of its interests in the region of Central Asia writ large.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, China has steadily increased its economic presence in Central Asia, especially in the energy sector. While the Central Asian states are reluctant to offer China prime drilling rights, the Chinese National Petroleum Company has been able to purchase rights to some secondary exploratory sites, particularly in Kazakhstan. More importantly, however, China has made substantial in-roads in finding ways to bring Central Asian energy directly to Chinese markets. It has constructed an oil pipeline spanning 1,300 kilometers from Kazakhstan's oil fields near the Caspian sea into China, and it has agreed with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to build a similar pipeline to bring natural gas into China.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, China has become increasingly involved in infrastructure projects in Central Asia, as it has in Africa, with the goal of improving its ability to secure lucrative energy deals. All evidence suggests that China will be engaged in the Central Asian energy market for the long-term. Central Asia provides a relatively close overland source of energy for China, and the Central Asian states find selling energy to China advantageous since it expands their options and keeps them from being dependent exclusively on energy transport routes through Russia.

While energy is the primary economic interest of China in Central Asia, it is not the only one. Not surprisingly, Chinese consumer goods are widespread throughout the Central Asian markets, and China appears poised to continue that trend. Already in the early 1990s, China opened trade routes with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to help bring consumer goods from China and scrap metal and other raw materials to China. Since that time, China has also opened an overland route to Tajikistan and has even helped to improve that country's internal transportation infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> It has also steadily increased its trade with every Central Asian state annually. In general, China appears to view Central Asia as a critical part of its present and future commerce and as a gateway to markets further west.

In the context of China's long-term interest in Central Asia both for the region's energy and its role as a gateway market to the west, it becomes clear that China's interests in Afghanistan go beyond worries about Uyghur separatists. China sees Afghanistan largely as an extension of Central Asia that can provide more sources of energy and other natural

---

<sup>2</sup> The Kazakhstan-China pipeline opened to commercial service in 2006 (see *Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline opens to commercial operation*, China Daily, July 12, 2006, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-07/12/content\\_639147.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-07/12/content_639147.htm)). The gas pipeline, which will bring gas from both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, is began construction in July 2008 (see *Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline To Start Service Next Year*, DownstreamToday.com, July 3, 2008, [http://www.downstreamtoday.com/news/article.aspx?a\\_id=11700](http://www.downstreamtoday.com/news/article.aspx?a_id=11700)).

<sup>3</sup> See David Trilling, *TAJIKISTAN: A CHINESE ROAD TO THE FUTURE?*, Eurasia Insight, August 1, 2007 (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav080107a.shtml>).

resources as well as eventually a gateway market to the Middle East. China already began to act on these interests late last year, when it purchased Afghanistan's Aynak copper mine for \$3.5 billion U.S. dollars, marking the largest single foreign direct investment in Afghanistan's history. One would assume that China may already be eyeing Afghanistan's oil and gas reserves, but for such investments to be profitable, stability and peace must be established in the country first.

### *The Central Asian States*

The interests of the Central Asian states in Afghanistan are simultaneously more direct and more reluctant than those of China. On the one hand, the Central Asian states bordering on Afghanistan, and particularly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, are very concerned about the presence of Muslim extremists in the country. The Uzbekistan state has allegedly been targeted by groups who were harbored by the Taliban, and the weak state of Tajikistan could be easily undermined by the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. The other Central Asian states, all of which have majority Muslim populations but secular governments, are likewise worried about an increase in Islamic militancy to the south. They, therefore, have reason to support U.S. and NATO objectives in Afghanistan, but are equally concerned about being associated with those objectives if they fail.

It is particularly interesting to note that the people of Central Asia generally are not pleased with the U.S. State Department's creation of the South and Central Asian Bureau that took place in 2005 with the intention of building ties between Central Asia and a reconstructing Afghanistan. Feeling closer linkages with other former Soviet states than with Afghanistan and Pakistan, many Central Asians have voiced to me a concern that they fear being drawn unwillingly by the United States into the conflict in Afghanistan, which they associate with a military quagmire from the Soviet experience in the late 1970s and 1980s.

While these are important concerns that must be taken into consideration, Afghanistan could also offer substantial economic opportunities for the Central Asian states. Unable to provide jobs to its populations, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan over the last decade have increasingly developed into sources of migrant workers for Russia and Kazakhstan. Reconstruction in Afghanistan could potentially provide these countries' unemployed with legal and more lucrative alternatives to the mostly illicit work in which they have been engaged elsewhere. Some workers from these states have already begun working in Afghanistan, but far more opportunities might exist if the situation stabilizes in the country. Likewise, the Central Asian states thus far have struggled to establish their products in foreign markets, and a stable and economically growing Afghanistan could potentially become a market where cross-border access could give Central Asian products an advantage.

The Central Asian states can also benefit from larger projects that are in discussion for Afghanistan. The U.S., for example, is trying to facilitate ways for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to provide electricity to Afghanistan through hydro-electric resources, and

discussions are underway concerning a natural gas pipeline that would travel from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India.<sup>4</sup> Such projects could be critical for both Central Asia and Afghanistan, allowing both to reap the benefits of development. Finally, Kazakhstan has the potential to be a serious foreign investor in Afghanistan in the same way it became in Georgia and Ukraine when Russian competition dissipated. Already, Kazakh businesses are involved in the construction projects that are part of the reconstruction, but a stable Afghanistan could potentially attract larger investment from Kazakhstan in everything from real estate to telecommunications. Such investment may appear less likely at the moment as Kazakhstan has been particularly hard hit by the global financial crisis, but if the country's robust financial sector is able to recover, it would be well poised to capitalize on early investments in Afghanistan.

### *Russia*

Finally, the interests of Russia in Afghanistan are more difficult to analyze. On the one hand, Russia would like to see a stable Afghanistan in order to ensure that the country does not become a further refuge for Chechen separatists, who have been waging war against the Russian state on and off for about fifteen years. On the other hand, Russia has its own issues of pride concerning the Soviet failure in Afghanistan. As Putin's Russia identifies itself increasingly with its Soviet legacy, it may not be interested in seeing the United States succeed where it failed. Furthermore, Russia continues to be concerned about U.S. influence in Central Asia and may view a stable pro-American Afghanistan as helping to facilitate such influence in former Soviet Central Asia. Finally, Russia's economic interests in Afghanistan are less clear than those of China or the Central Asian states.

In this context, Russia is the least likely of the countries examined here to contribute positively to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. That being said, with the correct incentives, Russia could find it in their interests to become involved in reconstruction. Pipelines from Central Asia through Afghanistan to India, for example, could open a new energy market for Russia, and Russian investors may begin eyeing Afghanistan's natural resources as China has begun to do. Russian companies, likewise, could play a key role in some of the larger projects planned for bringing Central Asian energy to Afghanistan. These potential benefits of a stable Afghanistan, however, must compete with Russia's suspicion of the United States and its issues of pride concerning the failed Soviet occupation in the 1980s.

---

<sup>4</sup> For the Central Asia-Afghanistan electricity agreement, see Abdul Raouf Zia, *Agreement signed in Kabul on electricity transmission project that connects Central Asia with South Asia*, [worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org), November 19, 2007 (<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/TAJKISTANEXTN/0,,contentMDK:21556974~menuPK:50003484~pagePK:2865066~piPK:2865079~theSitePK:258744,00.html>). For the Turkmenistan-India gas pipeline, see *India to Join Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Gas Pipeline*, *Independent Bangladesh*, April 1, 2008 (<http://www.independent-bangladesh.com/200803313829/business/india-to-join-turkmenistan-afghanistan-pakistan-gas-pipeline.html>).

### *Afghanistan's Northern Neighbors and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*

The role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in any cooperation of China, Russia, and the Central Asian states with the United States and NATO in Afghanistan remains an important question. What began in 1996 as the Shanghai Five, a more informal association of China and the countries of the former Soviet Union on which it borders (i.e. Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), has become a larger, more organized regional security alliance that is seeking to raise its international profile, often by challenging the international influence of the U.S. and Europe in the region. The SCO has often announced anti-American declarations, such as the one made in 2005 calling for the closure of U.S. and NATO airbases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and it has positioned itself as a regional alternative to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) that, unlike the OSCE, does not criticize its member-states for their human rights and democracy record.<sup>5</sup> In this context, one might expect the SCO to undermine U.S. efforts in Afghanistan more than assist them.

This past week, however, the SCO held a summit on Afghanistan in which its members agreed to take a more active role in Afghanistan's reconstruction.<sup>6</sup> With its member-states including Russia, China, and all of the Central Asian states with the exception of Turkmenistan, the SCO would be a logical vehicle through which these countries could coordinate their engagement in Afghanistan. That being said, the varied interests of these states in Afghanistan may make it difficult for such coordination to take place in any meaningful way. The question also remains as to whether Russia will try to steer the SCO to make declarations that undermine U.S. efforts in Afghanistan as they presumably did in 2005.

### *Suggestions for Fostering Regional Cooperation*

Despite their common interests in establishing a stable Afghanistan, China, Russia, and the Central Asian states remain reluctant to become too directly involved in Afghanistan's reconstruction. I would argue, however, that the involvement of Afghanistan's northern neighbors will be a necessity if the U.S. wants to forge the type of international coalition for reconstruction that is required. In engaging these states on Afghanistan, however, the United States should realize that it will be difficult to leverage much in the way of substantive aid. Likewise, involving Russia, China, or the Central Asian states in any military efforts at stabilization would create more problems than it would resolve. Instead, I believe that the United States should engage these countries exclusively in the reconstruction process and do so not via the SCO, but with each country separately. While it will be important to engage them on an international level through the United Nations both to recognize their contribution and to get government

---

<sup>5</sup> See Council on Foreign Affairs Briefer, *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (<http://www.cfr.org/publication/10883/>).

<sup>6</sup> See *China Calls on International Community to Cooperate on Afghanistan*, [Chinaview.cn](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-03/28/content_11087296.htm), March 28, 2009 ([http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-03/28/content\\_11087296.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-03/28/content_11087296.htm)).

buy-in, the most positive contributions each can make will likely be through their respective countries' private sectors.

The United States should welcome Chinese investment in Afghanistan and help facilitate that investment if, and only if, China will pledge to invest in a responsible way. This requires ensuring all investments are transparent and do not merely help to facilitate corruption within the Afghan government. It also necessitates China establishing local economic development in the areas where it invests. If China is extracting copper from a mine, it should also help to build up the local economy in the province where that mine is located. The United States must help China realize that such measures are critical if it is to protect its investments by contributing to the establishment of a viable and transparent Afghan state.

Additionally, the United States needs to facilitate the involvement of the Central Asian states in Afghanistan in a way that simultaneously fosters development in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Conscious efforts should be made to use vendors from Central Asia for construction materials and to employ Central Asians as laborers in the reconstruction. Finally, the U.S. should continue to promote planned projects for bringing Central Asian energy to Afghanistan, but, in doing so, it needs to ensure that these projects foster wider development in Central Asia and not merely benefit elites close to the seats of power in the Central Asian states.

Finally, the United States should encourage Russian investment in Afghanistan where possible. This would include direct investment by Russian companies as well as these companies' involvement in larger development projects, such as those aimed at bringing Central Asian energy to Afghanistan.

None of these tasks will be easy. Chinese investment does not have a strong track record of forsaking local corruption and ensuring transparent transactions. Russia remains reluctant to become too closely involved in Afghanistan's reconstruction and retains a certain animosity towards the entire U.S. effort in the country. The United States does not have a strong track record of designing cross-border development projects that benefit both sides of the border. That being said, conscious efforts to achieve these tasks could pay off over the long-term in multiple ways. Not only will they be critical to Afghanistan's reconstruction, but they may also establish a precedent for cooperation involving the U.S., Russia, and China when, as in Afghanistan, the general interests of all three countries coincide.