

Afghanistan Reflects US' Self-Obsession

The US has to rethink its strategy toward Afghanistan

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Forces led by the United States have neither been able to restore peace in Afghanistan nor help reconstruct the country even after almost 10 years of military action against the Taliban. On the contrary, security in Afghanistan has deteriorated, and a resurgent Taliban has created a more complex situation for the US and its allies.

The US has had to rethink its strategy toward Afghanistan.

Obama has said the Afghan issue is “far more than only a matter of the US, but an international security challenge at a higher level” and Washington would seek to establish a “new diplomatic mechanism”, such as a regional security and economic forum of regional powers (Russia, Iran, India and China) that are worried over the situation in Afghanistan. This means Obama – compared with his predecessor George W. Bush – puts more emphasis on cooperation with other countries and international organizations to fight terrorism. This then is the other shift in US strategy.

But the new US strategy has a “less important” role for China. That’s because the role China can play in Afghanistan and the extent to which Washington and Beijing can work together are determined by their strategic interests and geopolitical goals.

It is clear that the US would like to maintain its influence over Afghanistan even after withdrawing its troops, no matter when that happens. Which means it would not allow regional powers such as China to play a greater role in Afghan affairs. Instead, what the US is willing to share with countries like China is the burden of economic reconstruction.

Obama’s new policy includes some principles that are in line with China’s. For example, China has been saying that the international community should join hands to fight terrorism, and promote national reconciliation, help set up a representative coalition government and expedite reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. The differences in the basic stances of the US and China, however, make it difficult for them to cooperate deeply on the Afghan issue.

The first difference is in security interests. Washington’s major concern is to prevent the Taliban and al-Qaida from launching attacks on US soil and its overseas facilities and personnel. But China, as Afghanistan’s neighbor, also needs to tackle non-traditional security threats such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling and other cross-border crimes. Besides, the insistence of the US and its allies to continue their military strikes against the Taliban and consolidation of their military presence in Central and South Asia have put extra pressure on China’s defense and security plans.

The second difference is over economic input. The US has a huge number of troops in Afghanistan that provide security for its assistance projects. America gets priority in project selection because it offers “protection” to the Hamid Karzai government. And its economic input is aimed at paying for its military operations. In contrast, Chinese enterprises face great risk while working for Afghanistan’s reconstruction and encounter fierce international competition in getting a contract. And unlike the US, Chinese investments are mainly in roads, hospitals and schools, and come without any riders.

The third difference is in the choice of government. The US insists on establishing a Western-style “democratic” regime and has been trying to force its political model on the backward country, which resulted in the chaos in last year’s presidential polls. On the other hand, China believes the Afghans (of all ethnic groups and political parties) should decide on what form of government they want based on their culture, tradition and domestic conditions.

And the fourth difference is over geopolitical objectives. The US has an offensive counterterrorism strategy, in which Afghanistan is being used as a pawn to help it maintain its global dominance and contain its competitors. China, on the contrary, pursues a defensive national defense policy and wants to have good relations as neighbors of Afghanistan.

China cannot stay oblivious of the Afghan issue. The chaos caused by the war in Afghanistan is threatening security in China’s northwestern region. A weak government in Kabul could mean a poorlymanned border, which in turn would facilitate drug trafficking and arms smuggling and allow “East Turkistan” separatists to seek shelter in Afghanistan after causing trouble in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

Since the Afghan issue has been internationalized, China should get more countries to come together to resolve it. China should undertake certain necessary measures in accordance with UN resolutions, build a friendly and stable region with the help of other countries neighboring Afghanistan and try to resolve the Afghan issue through some international mechanisms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Asian Development Bank or a Central Asian regional cooperation mechanism, in which it could play an important role.

The SCO could play a more active role because five of Afghanistan’s six neighbors are its members or observers.

On the security front, the SCO’s joint anti-drug and joint anti-terrorism exercises can cut off the contacts of terrorist organizations and criminal groups with the outside world. In the economic sphere, regional economic and trade cooperation within the SCO could play an important role in Afghanistan’s economic recovery. But given the present situation within Afghanistan, an SCO-led reconciliation and reconstruction process is an unrealistic proposition. Hence, at present it could only provide help through multilateral channels.

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