

# Nurturing Sino-Afghan Ties: Ingenious Soft Power Exertion Prospects

On China's Strategic Opportunity to Support Afghanistan's  
Modernization by Sharing Selected Development Best Practices

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Afghanistan's first ever peaceful transition of authority is sealed, and it now has a determined and unswerving technocrat at the helm. Under President Ghani's stewardship, the country could, finally, start to live up to its potential — even if the path is steep and beset by many hurdles. As Afghanistan undertakes an attempt to do so, neighbor and economic behemoth China could play a significant role. Although the Chinese canvas differs considerably from that of the Afghan, there are best practices from China's development experience for Beijing to consider underlining and for Afghanistan's government to ponder making its own. Three practices that can be emulated relatively smoothly and with possible substantial impact on Afghanistan's modernization could be: I. forging a committed pro-development state, II. nurturing a state culture of innovation and experimentation, and III. molding foreign relations based primarily on economic cooperation and reverence. The prospect of transfer of a portion of Chinese “governmental DNA”, even if amended, could result in an ingenious display of Chinese soft

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power exertion, and would go well beyond the current confines of the main physiognomies of China's ties with the vast majority of states, economic cooperation and diplomatic gallantry. And — most importantly — it could have a catalyzing effect on raising the standard of living of some 30 million desolate Afghans.

### I. WHY CHINA?

Historically, China and Afghanistan have relished stable neighborly relations. Contemporary diplomatic ties have been mutually courteous, even though China decided not to stand under the international community's umbrella with both legs post-2001. Beijing has become more interested and involved in Afghanistan since announcement of the 2014 triple transition, and after an increase in insurgent activity in South Asia and within Chinese borders. Increased interaction has also been illustrated by no less than four visits to China by former president Karzai in his last four years of leadership. Because of the security situation in Afghanistan, virtually all high-level meetings were held in China. The level of diplomatic consistency displayed by China throughout the years has deeply impressed Karzai and prompted him to call China a "stable neighbor."<sup>1</sup> Afghan top officials often return from China underlining how impressed they are by verbal uniformity and discipline of officials regardless of their rank or age. Yet, both countries still hold little intricate acquaintance of another and either barely hosts individuals with a command of each other's languages or experts with extensive field exposure. At civic levels, knowledge is even more curtailed, with the pervasive view in China one of terror, and that in Afghanistan mainly embodied by exposure to low-grade Chinese industrial goods. This deficiency of interaction is not surprising considering that the moment that China decided to gradually open up, Afghanistan was invaded by the USSR just months after and has been subject to conflict throughout the Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping administrations. Yet, mutual interest has grown over the last few years to beef up economic and security cooperation post-2014 — provided that a political transition crisis in Kabul could be averted. While it is too

early for China to assess the capacity and operational sustainability of the new administration, particularly the working relationship between Ghani and Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, it would be prudent to start looking into means that go beyond future economic cooperation. There are ample opportunities in the governance realm that could cement Afghanistan's path to modernization and simultaneously facilitate Chinese investment. To understand why China is, arguably, the best candidate to share development best practices with Afghanistan it is necessary to return a few decades in history.

It took China quite some time to realize and concede at top echelons that modernity and connectivity have arrived in full force and are here to stay. And — fundamentally — China could no longer ignore it. There are but a few ways to omit modernity: topographical insulation, e.g., Bhutan and Papua New Guinea; imposed isolation, e.g., North Korea and Cuba; and an incompetence to modernize, which covers large swaths of the developing world, Afghanistan included. Minor groups worldwide are also simply disinterested in modernity, and this includes some in Afghanistan. What these groups fail to realize, however, is that the technologies that have made modernity possible can simply not be 'uninvented,' and thus governments and civil societies will need to learn to adapt, to *reinvent* themselves. Modernization and globalization have a few rules, hard but not terribly complex, and will need to be mastered. Without its mastery and if not at the table, one risks being on the menu and suffer from "the ugly side of globalization" as Ghani recently pointed out.<sup>2</sup>

When China decided to reinvent itself in the late 1970s, it was at the hands of Deng Xiaoping's administration that took a pragmatic yet courageous decision changing the fate of some 20 percent of humanity and world's longest continuous civilization. In a DRS (Direction Rhythm Speed) framework, a simple yet excellent structure that can be applied to strategic decision-making, Deng barely altered the *direction* of the country. Just like Mao Zedong he wanted a strong, united and prosperous China. His greatest contribution was to determine the country's fate by overhauling the *rhythm*, i.e., the methodology, by shifting focus away from

class struggle, and rather encourage individual enterprise, gradual marketization of the economy, and by connecting with the world. Through this, he made sure that substantial progress would be made to actually move in the chosen direction. As a grand strategy lacked, leeway was made for experimentation in political and economic policies. He also upped the *speed*, because of his deliberation, an accurate sense of urgency, to make up for lost time, or perhaps a combination of all three. In the late 1980s, his administration realized even more so that speed was a crucial factor to keep the masses employed and approving of the chosen methodology and model of governance. While the direction does not require much genius (one only needs to make a quick assessment of world's advanced economies vis à vis the underdeveloped economies), a sense of urgency, i.e., the speed does. This is particularly the case in the poorest developing states with a high youth ratio and limited socioeconomic mobility. Moving too slowly, or rather below potential, fuels discontent.

What really requires ingenuity is the rhythm, and no state in the world is as obsessed by it as China. No state has designated the amount of scholars, practitioners and analysts to examining and tweaking the methodology as China has. Beijing realizes that managing some one-fifth of humanity is, perhaps, one of the most daunting tasks ever to have befallen humanity and is not very different from walking a tight rope. It has therefore, contrary to India for instance, become very introspective on its development experience. China is in the middle of some of the more vigorous chapters on its growth trajectory and the designated legions meticulously analyze its own development, compare it with other development experiences worldwide and provide well-informed policy advice. And always they look through the lens of national development, i.e., national interest. This scientific apparatus has a great hand in the country's development, breaking heavily with approaches in the era preceding Deng. China's level of introspection is unique, and although it has not been able to prevent ill, a sufficient array of lesser policy decisions, e.g., breaking away with traditional Chinese concepts of respect for and harmony with nature, does tend to set the country apart from some of the advanced economies

that have “gotten out of touch” with methodologies that they have used to reach the standard of living they enjoy today.

Therefore, the Chinese development experience, or any of world’s socioeconomic success stories for that matter, and its unprecedented poverty alleviation track record offer Ghani’s administration excellent study material. China’s reemergence offers Afghanistan the prospect of a symbiotic relationship, one that has been mutually beneficial since the days of the Silk Road. The two states have always found common ground while reserving differences. Today that common ground is raising the standard of living and increasing security. While the running economic development and security interdependency dialogue is a chicken-and-egg question on which there is little consensus among scholars worldwide, it is fairly safe to state that economic development cannot await security to improve before it is kick started. This is particularly the case in a context of protracted and relatively low intensity style insurgency such as in Afghanistan.

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## II. FORGING A COMMITTED PRO-DEVELOPMENT STATE

Afghans have to come to understand that ultimately development needs an endogenous solution. At the end of the day, the Afghans themselves will have to develop the country, the international community, and even China or India, can only do so much. While Afghan youth is generally optimistic and believes in the development of their country, a notion of inertia prevailed among many officials in the last administration. However, development is a joint effort and particularly leadership has to set an example by displaying

unremitting commitment to development. The country's impressive comparative advantages, its generous mineral resources endowment and strategic geographic setting at the heart of Asia, will remain unused or underused unless the new Afghan administration makes firm pragmatic policy decisions that create jobs and generate wealth.

At the early stages of a state's development trajectory, when there is limited social capital, it is the merit and political will of leadership that determine its course. Ghani's administration should make firm and possibly even unpopular decisions so that there can be certainty and stability in the affairs of the Afghan people. Prudent and committed governments utilize to the fullest potential the limited resources at a country's disposal, like Azerbaijan, Botswana, Chili, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Vietnam today and so many advanced economies yesterday.

In the former Afghan administration, the direction and rhythm was too diffuse: short-term individual thinking prevailed in both government as well as civil society. And, lingering endemic corruption fueled distrust, and will continue to do so until Ghani's administration has mitigated it. Today, Afghanistan, together with Somalia and North Korea, is perceived as one of world's most corrupt countries.<sup>3</sup> Civil society's clout is weak and divided, the economy is largely sustained by easily dispersed international aid money, weak governance institutions have limited translucence and accountability mechanisms, and corruption potential is sustained by traditional norms and nepotistic underpinnings. It is clear that the transparency and accountability design of the institutions parachuted on Afghan soil is weak, and that the international community and Afghan civil society have been toothless in their attempts to mitigate corruption so far. Efforts of the former are scattered and often uncoordinated with other actors. Attempts to empower and equip civil society with tools to pressure government have been disappointing. The government has shown little political will to address corruption and the official corruption watchdog, the High Office of Oversight and Anti-Corruption (HOOAC), is labeled incompetent. To further underline the limitation of existing efforts take the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) case: their September 2013 quarterly

report to US Congress indicates that no anti-corruption strategy by the institution was drafted or approved after 2010. Transparency International's (TI) 2013 Global Corruption Barometer (GCB) indicates that 40% of Afghans believe that corruption had worsened over the previous two years. Is this an administration committed to sustainable development?

Afghan civil society will have legitimate reason to doubt government capacity and genuine will until the new administration alters the status quo, but in the process it should not passively wait at the sidelines. They do not have the luxury to shift responsibility to new generations to reconstruct the country. A democratic society does not run itself, and the Afghan electorate must be better informed, more interested, proactive and vigilant than it currently is. How else is it going to exert influence on government through public opinion? Afghans have to come to understand that there is a price to pay for democracy, they cannot just take it for granted. The Afghan government has to realize at all levels that democracy requires socioeconomic development to succeed.<sup>4</sup> If the new administration fails to make democracy "work" over the next decade or so, there is a good chance that it will be overthrown and all the hard work of the international community and generations of Afghans will have been in vain. The extent to which the Afghan people enjoy stability and prosperity will also determine the new administration's perceived legitimacy.

It is exactly for this reason that the new administration has to forge an all-pervasive and penetrating pro-development mindset among all layers of the government apparatus. While the incumbent president and a handful of other senior level government officials are truly committed to development and have the merit, forging this commitment will have to be instilled in the rest of the apparatus in Kabul and in provincial capitals allowing it to trickle down to the lowest denominations. Leadership will need to create and disseminate a clear and quantifiable objective for all officials nationwide and utilize a carrot-and-stick approach in service of development.

Where does China come in? Not as a best case study to curb corruption (Singapore or Sweden would be much better cases): it

has taken many administrations to actually decide to clean house. The netting “tigers and flies” campaign would, however, qualify, and Ghani’s order to reinvestigate the Kabul Bank corruption case and go after tigers is a good start. Ideally, as the administrations since Deng’s have done in China, a PR apparatus should be created that instills a pro-development mindset at the government and civil society levels. The government apparatus cannot be efficient in reaching its set direction if officials are not on the same page. It is particularly vital that Ghani and Abdullah commit to the same direction and rhythm. Currently, there is simply too much tribal and ethnic loyalty, Afghans officials will have to rid themselves from such narrow-mindedness. They will need to understand what (the direction) they are working towards, why (national unity and survival of the state) they are working towards it, how they fit in the bigger picture approach (rhythm), and be aware that they are screened closely by checks and balances. Repetitive PR apparatus activity can build such a mindset and commitment to development, transparency and accountability. In support of this, the new Afghan administration could set up government learning institutes in Kabul and in all provincial capitals. These institutes would cement the mindset and teach officials, e.g., the latest findings, best practices, and a “seeking truth from facts” attitude.<sup>5</sup> Beijing could invite senior-level officials of the new Afghan administration to China to learn more about the intricacies of China’s government learning institutes and its extensive PR apparatus.

This PR apparatus should also focus on Afghan civil society, still predominantly, rural and illiterate. They will need to become aware of a new mindset in the country, of the opportunities that it creates, of the carrots and sticks, and of the values that are required to commit to development. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s “father” and one of modern history’s most illustrious statesmen, has repetitively said that the key to Singapore’s spectacular achievements has been discipline. He has barely ever given long stories or complex theories as an explanation. Discipline is not a value one would quickly associate with Afghanistan: countries at the other end of the development spectrum like Denmark, Germany, and Singapore would probably come to mind first. All have cultivated a strong

notion of discipline, i.e., a work ethic, which has built their economies and continues to sustain them. It should give Afghans confidence that Japanese<sup>6</sup> and Germans were considered indolent by the British (who had a more advanced economy at the time) in the 19th century.<sup>7</sup> Yet, while values like pragmatism and discipline can be trained, they require an ecology that nurtures them; policy measures, inclusive institutions and incentive structures that enable, facilitate and sustain socioeconomic development.<sup>8</sup> Why would an Afghan diligently study civil engineering without any job prospects in that field? Of what use is discipline if the boss promotes based on kinship only? So while socioeconomic development is required to nurture this mindset in the country, awaiting it is passive. The poverty-stricken civil society China that Deng inherited did not await socioeconomic development either to exhibit their work ethic. All they needed was to be permitted to act entrepreneurial, and an ecology that would facilitate this. Undeniably, Afghanistan faces a wide range of challenges and instilling pragmatism and discipline as social values are no silver bullets to solve any of them nor to sustain democracy or guarantee economic development. But, it can shape a new mindset with which these challenges can be addressed in a more yielding fashion by designing smart development policies and creating inclusive and functional institutions. At the end of the day however, it will have to be the state that leads and paves the way. A short-term, mid-term and long-term framework can be setup, and China's five-year guidance plans can be studied as a possible role model.

### III. INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION

Afghanistan's direction was set by the international community, which sacrificed many lives, invested humungous financial means, and spent over a decade to reconstruct the country. It should be noted that no other major power than the US decided to lead the initiative to overthrow extremist authority in Afghanistan. While clearly this found its origin in the 9/11 attacks, extremism was a threat not only to the US, but to all of humanity. Afghanistan and the international community should be utterly grateful for

this. Yet, while notable progress has been booked from the 2001 zero baseline, the blueprint of the methodology to reconstruct the country after intervention had significant flaws. It leaned more towards providing fish, rather than teach how to fish. And, the pace has been subpar considering the incredible global intellect allocated to the reconstruction of the country, the immense amount of funds poured into the country, and the unsustainable state of the economy and chronic unemployment today. Too much consideration was given to security: reminiscent of early day penny-farthing bicycles with a small back wheel (sustainable economy) and a large front

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wheel (security). Surely no miracles could be expected considering the dynamics of the Afghan canvas, the desolate state of the country in 2001, and the relatively short timeframe. However, the Afghan government and the international community allocated most of their resources to physical security, and have in the process neglected a vital component of *psychological security* of the populace — employment. Unemployment stands at 15%,<sup>9</sup> and 36% live below the national poverty line.<sup>10</sup> Part of

the problem also lied with the interests and foremost merit of top Afghan policy makers and advisors. The former administration had no comprehensive and quantifiable development vision. And neither did they adhere to short-term milestones.

The new Afghan administration intends to steward the country based on an increase in merit at the government. With more merit, there is also more capacity, and hopefully, perceptiveness to look abroad for developmental best practices. Ghani intends to bring forth a more development-oriented administration. On paper, he has a clear direction set. The rhythm has a quite detailed framework, although experimentation shall be needed. As for the speed, history will tell. However, his vision is predominantly his own, raising the question of whether one man can rebuild the country, and how he

will disseminate and nurture his vision in the government apparatus and in civil society. Deng was known for thinking about the big issues and leaving details to other, he did not micromanage.<sup>11</sup> But, contrary to China, Afghanistan does not have sufficient merit in Kabul, let aside the provinces. Innovative practices are needed.

In the last thirteen years, most media outlets, think tanks and experts have stressed the challenges, particularly security, that Afghanistan faces; virtually leading to an “analysis paralysis.” Few have underlined that Afghanistan has a unique convergence of factors that it could cleverly yield to develop the country. For starters, a wide range of countries contribute to the country in a variety of ways — some militarily, others diplomatically, or financially. As a result of “Afghanistan fatigue” and the occurrence of wild fires and bushfires elsewhere in the world, the international community has had to recalibrate its attention, but many of the larger original contributors have committed and this continued support and attention is a major external advantage that Afghanistan relishes — Kabul has sufficient friends in world’s economic capitals.

And there is a set of incredible internal advantages: Afghanistan literally sits on top of one of Asia’s largest untapped mineral deposits. The country also has nutrient-rich soils for significant agricultural output, some 12% of the arable land of the country can annually produce food for up to 160 million people, and it has a unique geographic setting connecting landlocked Central Asia with South Asia, the Middle East and China. This offers potential as a trade and energy corridor and subsequent prospects for downstream industries. And perhaps most importantly, the brain capacity and muscle to develop this country, the human resources, are also there: a rising youthful labor force (aged 0–25 years) of some 23 million, an incredible 68% of the population.

To yield this set of advantages efficiently and customized to the Afghan backdrop, the new administration could consider an overarching developmental policy of innovation and experimentation. The security dynamics certainly could use an innovate approach. It is clear that barely anybody, worldwide, seems to really know how to develop Afghanistan: it requires intricate

knowledge of the Afghan canvas and of all intricacies embroidered in it. Even Ghani, who fortunately has an economic vision for the development of the country, might encounter a disconnect between vision and reality down the road. Experimentation with policies is thus commendable. Kabul could connect with Beijing to review innovation and experimentation conducted in China since 1978. While some concepts, such as Special Economic Zone (SEZ), could be emulated rather straightforward in a customized version, others might need closer examination.

Innovation will also be needed at an institutional level, a pro-development state also needs tailored pro-development institutions. One such example could be a centralized economic development agency, in the fashion of Japan's previous Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and China's current National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). These two agencies have proven instrumental in the economic development of both states. These institutions both have had clear, quantifiable goals with the mission to plan and expedite economic reform. The Afghan new administration should research which components of this institution could be applied to the Afghan canvas. To tackle Afghanistan's systemic corruption challenge, the latest reforms in the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) could be studied. In support of this, the new administration should consider establishing supportive government directed research centers. Currently, the Afghan government is too thinly equipped with solid researchers and analysts who can provide scientific policy advice. A culture of "keep learning" and "seeking truth from facts" should be instilled in the Afghan government's DNA.

Such research centers could study China's development experience and also those of states with a more similar backdrop, such as Botswana, Kazakhstan and Mongolia. These countries can provide valuable lessons on best practices and avoiding pitfalls. This way Afghanistan will learn how to pursue a more scientific approach to development; apply a strategic approach to its development with clear plans and quantifiable targets with set timeframes — yet modify these if they fail to produce results. Lastly, Kabul could examine China's policy of allowing some

regions to get rich first, in Afghanistan that could be the north. The north is relatively stable and might somewhat level the Pashtun Tajik power imbalance in favor of the latter.

#### IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STABLE FOREIGN RELATIONS

The Deng administration realized that, for China to modernize, it would have to depart from its voluntary isolation and connect with the world. This included setting aside ideological differences and historic bitterness. China reached out to any country, as large as Brazil or as small as Trinidad and Tobago, as near as Mongolia or as far as Namibia, as prosperous as Norway or as economically underdeveloped as Bangladesh. It also pushed for stable relations and increased multilateral institutional integration with immediate and extended neighbors, although ties with some have weakened after maritime disputes since 2010. China also prioritized the advantage of closer economic ties with Japan over memories of historic conflict, because it needed Japanese technology transfer and welcomed its investment. China did not forget, but rather decided to act pragmatic and prudent in the interest of developing the country. The practice of economic cooperation has paid off, as China's economic ties with the world have been the underpinning of its economic success story.

Afghanistan will also have to learn to set aside historic grievance and contemporary tensions with neighboring Pakistan. The current relationship is zero-sum and the opportunity costs run high. Border disputes have to be laid aside now, solving that can come later. If you are coastal you serve the world, but if you are landlocked you serve your neighbors. Afghanistan will also have to become diplomatically more proactive in engaging constructively with Pakistan, learning more about its northern neighbors, the Central Asian states, exploring connectivity and investment opportunities with India and Iran. A proactive, interested and respectful diplomacy culture should be underpinned by a PR campaign that propagates the new course that the Afghan government has selected and its mutually beneficial bilateral intentions. As always, transparency and proactivity adds value.

The rationale behind this practice is to create more favorable conditions for Afghanistan's and ultimately also the broader region's benefit. Kabul will have to lay a deeper foundation for relationships of shared interests, promote regional security cooperation (as tenuous achieving that currently may seem), and attempt to forge broad social and public support in neighboring and extended neighboring countries for long-term development of relations. Good relations, especially with immediate and extended neighbors, are vital to regional stability and to trade beyond the immediate regions.

Afghanistan is not in a luxury position to discriminate, it will have to propagate to the world: "We are setting a new course, an innovative way of tackling poverty, and we are perceptive to stable and mutually beneficial relations with any state in the world."

#### V. CONCLUSION

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The exogenous and endogenous advantages that Afghanistan relishes are promising, however the development of the country will largely depend on the political will of the new administration.

The exogenous and endogenous advantages that Afghanistan relishes are promising, however the development of the country will largely depend on the political will of the new administration. Ghani and a handful of senior officials have the will and the merit. Ghani, as any leader is required to, provides strategic direction. But, will that suffice?

The new administration will have to apply a coherent strategic and scientific approach to development and make sure that the ecology, tools, mechanisms and above all incentives to do so are present. Without it, factions, local power brokers and the labor force will lack consensus and stall development of the country. Ghani's administration needs to instill and foster a pro-development state at the central level and all the way to the village level, accompanied by institutions and policies to facilitate this. Research bodies to support it with unbiased

scientific policy advice will be essential, and until Afghanistan has built its own solid research bodies, it could collaborate with China's vast scholarly institutes who could share the three underlined best practices in this paper with the Afghan government, and possibly even provide novel and tailored experimentation advice. There will be no greater gift that China can bestow upon the Afghan people now that the international community has "closed" its long chapter on Afghanistan. The three selected best practices are not necessarily unique to China and neither do they exclude other best practices found elsewhere. Their possible emulation is not a simple matter of "copy & paste," and deserves further thorough research. Yet, before Beijing would consider sharing this, Afghan leadership will have to be perceptive to such possible support.

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