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ChinaBuilds Military Base in                          Afghanistan                                                      Peter KORZUN  The Afghan Badakhshan province shares a commonborder with the China’s Xinjiang UygurAutonomous Region. Badakhshanwas part of the ancient Silk Roadlinking Asia with Europe.

The Silk Road is re-emerging. China’s wants theprovince to be stable and is providing aid to rebuild infrastructure. Chinais interested in stable supplies of raw materials, which Afghanistan has largedeposits of.  Beijing is to invest$55 billion to create an economic corridor going viaAfghanistan to the Arabian Sea. China is the Afghanistan’s largest trading partner able to make much desired investments.   According toits “ OneBelt, One Road” (OBOR) project, a big infrastructure is to bebuilt in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

So, peace in Afghanistan meets theChina’s interests but there is little hope the United States can bring it.   After all, it has failed to achieve anysubstantial gains since 2001. There have been surges and reductions, changes oftactics and strategy, numerous reports on how to change the tide but theTaliban is strong, economy is still in shambles with and drugs trafficking beingthe only business thriving. So far, the Trump administration has not presenteda long-awaited strategy defining its Afghanistan policy, despite the fact thatthere are 8400 American troops in the country. The presence will increase soon. The US relationships with key actors, such as Pakistan, are in shambles. Washington has recently suspended military aid to that country.

The instability in Afghanistan threatens the OBOR’s flagship project -the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Beijing is working hard  to improve the Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. Itarranged a tripartitemeeting at foreign ministers level in 2017. The talks workingpanels to promote cooperation in various areas. Another meeting is  expected to take place thisyear in Kabul. TheEastTurkistan Islamic Movement, a Uighurnationalist and Islamic movement from China’s Xinjiang region, is operating in Afghanistan. The militants gaincombat experience fighting side by side with the Taliban and other militantgroups. Russiaand China step up military aid to Central Asian states.

They believe that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization(SCO) can substantially contribute into achieving peaceful settlement. Both aretrying to bring together regional states. Moscow and Beijing are motivated by theirnational interests, which coincide. As major powers they are working together topromote security in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

TheAfghan government officials reportedthat China is tobuild a military base in Badakhshan. The weapons and equipment will beChinese but the facility will be manned by Afghan military. No doubt, Chinesemilitary instructors and other personnel will come to carry out for train andassist missions. The preparations for construction have alreadybegun.  Vice Chairmanof China’s Central Military Commission XuQilian saidthe construction is expected to be complete in 2018. In2017, the Taliban delivered serious strikes temporarilycapturing Ishkashim and Zebak districts of Badakhshan from the government troops. TheAfghan government failed to provide the military presence substantial enough toensure security. Before the attacks, an agreement with local field commanders hadbeen in place, giving them their share of  lapis lazuli production in exchange for peace.

Butinternal bickering undermined the fragile peace between the local groups andthe Taliban seized the opportunity to intervene. The Islamic State’s presencein the province is a matter of special concern. It all makes border security an issue of paramount importance forBeijing. Thequestion is how far is China ready to go? Until now, it has limited itsmilitary activities to special operations teams patrolling the WakhanCorridor.   A military base in Badakhshan is an importantmove to demonstrate  Beijing is ready toexpand its presence in the country.

Beijing has a trump card the US lacks – thecooperationof Russia and Pakistan. Beijing represents the SCO, a large internationalorganization comprising such actors as Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan and the countriesof Central Asia.  The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group’s activities were restarted last year upon the initiative of Russian president VladimirPutin. They were suspended in 2009.  Russiaadvocates launching direct talks between the Afghan Government andthe Taliban as soon as possible.

Beijing supports the idea. Moscow has said it isready to host aconference on Afghanistan.   TheSCO’s participation can make the crisis management process a real internationalendeavor. It will reduce the clout of the US but increase chances for peace.

Securitycooperation and diplomatic activities can open new chapter in the Afghan history.