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POLICY BRIEF

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The American Analysis of Military and Security Development in the Wakhan Corridor (1980-2021)

by Michael Lambert

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense to the US Congress on “Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China” (2020) points to Beijing’s growing military presence in Central Asia, and attests to the strategic interest of this region both for NATO troops in Afghanistan and for Chinese authorities who wish to monitor the Wakhan corridor that interacts with the region of Xinjiang to control drug trafficking and terrorist threats.

The American analysis can be traced back to the CIA’s first reports on the issue, which in 1954, 1959 and 1980 looked at relations between the USSR and the young People’s Republic of China in the same area, focusing on the question of cooperation and rivalry between Moscow and Beijing. Over three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, at a time when the countries of Central Asia are enjoying greater autonomy on the international scene, this policy brief analyses the reasons why the Department of Defense has taken a renewed interest in the region and summarises how Washington views the Wakhan Corridor (1954 - 2020) and development of the China - Central Asian and Sino-Russian relations in the post-Soviet world order.

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Introduction

In April 1980, the CIA - National Foreign Assessment Center published a research paper (GC 80-10038) entitled “The Wakhan Corridor: An Unlikely Link between Afghanistan and China”,¹ which mentioned military activities in the Badakhshan province and the potential involvement of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the region. According to the CIA in the 1980s, China’s main interest in the region is linked to the relationship between the Uighur Muslim community in Xinjiang (western China) and terrorist groups in Afghanistan to which the Wakhan corridor belongs.

As mentioned by the CIA’s previous declassified reports (1954, 1959, 1964 and 1980), it seems that the Chinese influence is more a constant than a new trend in the region. Nonetheless, the recent opening of a Chinese military facility in Tajikistan (at the border with the Wakhan Corridor) has been confirmed by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) in 2020, and raises questions about the terms of the agreements between Tajikistan and China at a critical time when NATO troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan. Thus, the questions that arise from the US DoD report published in 2020 are how Chinese military activities have evolved in the region since the CIA’s analysis in 1980, and what impact this might have on military cooperation in the area. Furthermore, can we talk about growing Sino-Russian cooperation, central Sino-Asian cooperation, or both?

A Direct Link between Afghanistan and China

The Wakhan Corridor (زېلهد ناخاو in Pashto and 瓦罕走廊 in simplified Chinese) is a narrow strip of territory belonging to Afghanistan at the intersection of Tajikistan, Pakistan and Kashmir. The corridor, wedged between the Pamir Mountains in the north and the Karakoram Range in the south, is about 350 km long² and 13 to 65 km wide.

An ancient trade route through the valley has been used since ancient times but weather conditions are a major obstacle to its economic development.

According to the 1980 CIA report, “because Afghanistan shares a common border with China, it would appear that the Chinese would freely use the Wakhan to support insurgents in Afghanistan. Indeed, rumours and speculation persist that the Chinese are smuggling weapons and men through the Wakhan into northern Afghanistan”.³

The concerns for an increasing Chinese military presence have increased due to the Belt and Road Initiative project (OBOR) launched by Xi Jinping in 2013, and even more so after the settlement of a Chinese installation in Tajikistan, a few kilometres from the Wakhan corridor.⁴ The main concern of Western powers, especially the United States, is the possible development of a hard power strategy as a result of the economic strategy through OBOR, which could lead to a further development of military facilities in the future.

Beijing’s unofficial presence attests to a growing Chinese footprint in Central Asia, which seems to go hand in hand with growing economic influence. But it could also attest to a desire to control relations between the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and the rest of the Muslim world, particularly because of Xinjiang’s proximity to Afghanistan and Pakistan, which maintains relations with Islamist groups such as ISIS.

¹ CIA (1980). The Wakhan Corridor: An Unlikely Afghan-China Link. *Foreign Assessment Center*.

² US Bureau of Intelligence and Research, “International Boundary Study of the Afghanistan–USSR Boundary (1983),” p. 7.

³ CIA, “The Wakhan Corridor: An Unlikely Afghan-China Link,” *Foreign Assessment Center* (1980).

⁴ Catherine Putz, “China in Tajikistan: New Report Claims Chinese Troops Patrol Large Swaths of the Afghan-Tajik Border,” *The Diplomat* (2019), <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/china-in-tajikistan-new-report-claims-chinese-troops-patrol-large-swaths-of-the-afghan-tajik-border/>.

The opening of the Chinese military centre⁵ thus attests to several geopolitical changes in Central Asia:

- An acceptance of the Chinese military presence in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) area.

This raises the question of whether we are talking about a strengthening of Sino-Russian relations or if Russia's influence on the region is weakening., or even if Moscow agrees with such an initiative?

- Is the Chinese presence to anticipate and respond to an existing threat, or to destabilise the region as mentioned by the American Department of Defense⁶ and in the CIA reports? In this context, the Chinese army is active in Xinjiang where it is fighting against terrorism, but it remains difficult to determine whether Beijing aims to anticipate an increase in the terrorist threat or to respond to an existing one. Another option would be, as mentioned by the CIA in the 1980s, to destabilise the region by supplying arms to the protagonists, which could have consequences for stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in other words for NATO security in Afghanistan and for deteriorating the relations between Pakistan and India.
- Another hypothesis would be the desire to strengthen military cooperation with Moscow and the peoples of Central Asia in the fight against terrorism. As of today, Beijing presents the facilities as centres for the fight against drug trafficking.

It should also be mentioned that the presence of the Murgab Airport is a major advantage for the transport of Chinese troops, combined with the worries of Xi Jinping about trouble from Afghanistan spilling into Xinjiang. China also built a new airport on the Chinese side of the Tajik-Chinese border.

⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," Annual Report to Congress (2020); Michał Bogusz, Mariusz Marszewski, "China's military presence in Tajikistan," OSW (2019).

⁶ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," Annual Report to Congress (2020)

Sino-Central Asian Relations in the Making

A research centre in Poland, the OSW,⁷ has mentioned that the location of the Chinese military base in the border area with China might suggest that its existence is an unofficial form of repayment of Tajikistan's debt and the possible start of new territorial concessions to the stronger neighbour. The weight of Tajik denial of the Chinese military presence is tempered by the fact that border adjustments in favour of China were similarly denied in 2002 (and were formalised in 2011). Similar territorial concessions were made by Kazakhstan (1996) and Kyrgyzstan (1998, revealed in 2001).⁸

With the Chinese military installation in Tajikistan, China is taking a step forward in projecting its hard power abroad, an approach that goes hand in hand with the opening of the Chinese People's Liberation Army support base in Djibouti. To date, two other cases of potential installations have been noticed in Myanmar with a SIGINT naval installation on the Big Island of Coco and a base in Neuquén province in Patagonia (land loaned to the Chinese government during the presidency of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner).

A report by the US Department of Defense - Office of the Secretary of Defense "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China" sheds some light on this phenomenon by mentioning :

*"Beyond its current base in Djibouti, the PRC is very likely already considering and planning for additional overseas military logistics facilities to support naval, air, and ground forces. The PRC has likely considered locations for PLA military logistics facilities in Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, and Tajikistan. The PRC and Cambodia have publicly denied having signed an agreement to provide the PLAN with access to Cambodia's Ream Naval Base."*⁹

⁷ Bogusz and Marszewski, "China's military presence in Tajikistan."

⁸ Bogusz and Marszewski, "China's military presence in Tajikistan."

⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," Annual Report to Congress, (2020).

According to the same report to the US Congress, since at least 2016, forces of the Chinese People's Armed Police (PAP) have probably been operating in Tajikistan, patrolling the tri-border region linking Tajikistan, Afghanistan and China.

This is likely to be related to the creation in August 2016 of a quadrilateral counter-terrorism coordination mechanism between Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Tajikistan, to jointly strengthen border security against the "three evils" as defined by China (terrorism, separatism and religious extremism).

Although the agreement may have initially allowed combined patrols, China now appears to be conducting unilateral patrols in the tri-border region. Beijing is also extending cooperation with Tajikistan, notably by broadening the bilateral counter-terrorism exercise in 2019, which includes fighter-bombers, UAVs and air support combined with Tajik special operations forces.

An interesting point to note is that, according to the U.S. Department of Defense report, China's concerns about border stability are likely to have been heightened after the United States and NATO combat forces began withdrawing from Afghanistan in 2014, and in particular concerns about terrorists moving from Afghanistan to China's Xinjiang province. In addition, in 2015, China passed an anti-terrorism law authorising counter-terrorist military operations abroad.

The Future of Sino-Russian Relations in the Spotlight

The opening of the facility in Tajikistan could be in line with the growing cooperation between China and Russia. Thus, in June 2019, Moscow and Beijing moved their relations towards a "global strategic partnership of coordination in a new era", committing themselves to closer coordination on global security issues and mutual support. The air forces of the People's Liberation Army (中国人民解放军空) and the Russian aerospace forces (Воздушно-космические силы) subsequently carried out their first combined air patrol in the Asia-Pacific region.

For the second consecutive year, China took part in a Russian strategic command and staff exercise, TSENTR-2019, held this year in the Russian Central Military District. In addition, cooperation between the two armies includes the joint development of defence technologies, exercises and cooperation on other military modernisation initiatives. Despite continued military cooperation, the PRC and Russia have denied the creation of a military alliance or their intention to conclude one.

China participated in Russia's strategic command exercise with elements of the armed forces of India, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The aim of the exercise was to test the readiness levels of the Russian army and interoperability between regional partners, while simulating a response to terrorist threats in Central Asia. China represented the largest foreign contingent, deploying some 1,600 ground and air troops from the PLA Western Theatre Command and nearly 30 planes and helicopters, including H-6 bombers. Following last year's VOSTOK exercise, TSENTR marked the second consecutive year that China participated in the Russian command staff's series of capstone exercises.

Analysis of Previous Central Intelligence Reports

Chinese interest in the Wakhan Corridor is no news to the CIA, who declassified several reports on the topic. On September 1959, the report "Possible Chinese Communist Claims to the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan" already underlined the interest in controlling the region to ensure Chinese national security. At that time, reports underlined the Chinese-USSR territorial dispute on the control of the Pamir area in Soviet Tajikistan. A whole report "The Wakhan Corridor and Adjacent Areas" issues previously on November 1964 (RR GS 64-20) underlined the knowledge of the CIA when it comes to the region and the Chinese practices similar to what is experienced nowadays:

“Available reports convey the general picture of a buildup in strength between 1955 and 1960, with increasing reliance on Chinese troops in preference to troops of local origins. The total number of Chinese military forces stationed at various posts in the Pamirs (including P’u-li) and in Hunza border areas as of late 1959 was reported to be less than 700 men.”¹⁰

Taking into account the CIA’s interpretation, it seems that the Chinese influence is more a constant than a new trend in the region, and that the collapse of the USSR and the increase in Chinese military power make it possible to expand China’s presence in the area to ensure China’s national security while at the same time strengthening cooperation with Russia and Central Asian states, whereas it was essentially based on bilateral relations between the USSR and China in the past.

Conclusion

The Chinese PAP presence in the region highlights Beijing’s growing hard power, and while Beijing is confident enough to set up new facilities abroad, it does not wish to say that it officially, in contrast to Djibouti. More importantly, it emphasises Tajik and Russian willingness to accept China’s presence in the CSTO, which shows the growing need to step up the fight against international terrorism whose networks are active in Russia (Chechnya and Dagestan) and China (Xinjiang).

The withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan is also raising the question of what alternative will follow in the region, as both the CSTO and China having interest in securing the region. As such, and in view of previous declassified CIA reports from the 1950s and 1980s and the DoD report issued in 2020, the Wakhan corridor has been and remains one of the areas in which Sino-Russian military cooperation is becoming a reality.

¹⁰ CIA, “The Wakhan Corridor and Adjacent Areas (Supplementary Notes to CIA/RR GR-56, November 1954),” Office of Research and Reports (1964).

Policy Recommendations

- The US Department of Defense, US intelligence community and other Western intelligence agencies (e.g., Five Eyes members) should continue to monitor (all-sources intelligence, including HUMINT on the ground) developments in the Wakhan Corridor area to ensure that activities remain within the framework of international agreements. This goes in line with the results of the Annual Report to Congress.¹¹ Moreover, intelligence gathered on the ground will make it possible to learn more about Chinese military strategies abroad and to develop a comparative approach with information collected in Djibouti, Africa, by the United States and its allies.
- The People’s Republic of China has the option of either deciding to adopt a new strategy to reduce the visibility of foreign military activities in the future (black operations), or to openly assess the existence and operations of military installations abroad, following a similar trend to that in Africa. Beijing’s foreign influence in Central Asia (soft and hard power) may be an opportunity to develop new military cooperation with the CSTO and to guarantee security following the reduction/withdrawal of NATO troops. Nevertheless, this needs to be done in cooperation with NATO to ensure that the takeover is accurate and to safeguard the continued containment of terrorist groups.
- The United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) should step up monitoring of areas near the Wakhan corridor to ensure that activities remain within the framework of containment of the terrorist threat and, and to prevent arms trafficking in the region. Activities in the Wakhan corridor could be detrimental to Eurasian stability due to the terrorists operating in the OSCE member states. This is of major interest to the Russian Federation because terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan have ties with Chechnya and Syria.

¹¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,” Annual Report to Congress (2020).

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