



CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS VI. RELATIONS WITH AFGHANISTAN IN THE MODERN PERIOD

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vi. Relations with Afghanistan in the Modern Period

Throughout history China and Afghanistan shared few mutual interests, with the exception of a certain amount of trade, mostly tea and fruit, via the direct caravan route from [Chinese Turkestan](#) (Xinjiang) across the high passes of the Pamirs and the Wākān corridor to northern Afghanistan (Shahrani, pp. 41ff.). As a result, by the late 13th/19th century a small Afghan trading colony had been established in the main *bāzārs* of Xinjiang (Bellew, p. 246). In 1322/1904, according to an unpublished letter by George Macartney, British consul in Kashgar from 1890 to 1918, in the whole of Xinjiang there were about 300-400 Afghan residents, most in Yarkand (Suo-che) and a few in Aksu (A-ke-su), Kashgar (Ka-shi), Yengisar (Yangi Hissar, Ying-ji-sha), Khotan (He-tian), and Keriya (Ke-li-ya) (National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Secr. F. Pros., February 1906, nos. 130-49). Most were wealthy merchants carrying on trade with India; they owned large landed properties, and some had taken



Uighur wives. The mere presence of this small colony provided grounds for the opening of an ephemeral Afghan consulate in the early 1300s Š./1920s, the first Afghan diplomatic mission on Chinese territory. The consul was Moḥammad Šarīf Khan, a Tajik from Kabul.

Moves to establish closer political ties began in the 1310s Š./1930s, when the Muslim government of the short-lived Republic of Eastern Turkistan, which was founded in 1312 Š./1933 and enjoyed the support of most Afghan settlers in the region, sought a political alliance with Afghanistan. A mission dispatched to Kabul in 1312 Š./1934 failed, however, to elicit more than a sympathetic welcome from the Afghans. In the years 1312-16 Š./1933-37 the former amir of Khotan, Moḥammad Amīn, was also conducting intrigues in Kabul, though equally without success (India Office Records, London, unpublished reports from the British embassy in Kabul).

Although on 14 Dalv 1322 Š./5 March 1944 a treaty of friendship had been signed by Afghanistan and the Guomintang (Kuomintang, Nationalist party) government of the Republic of China, Afghanistan was nevertheless one of the first countries to recognize the new People's Republic of China, on 22 Jadī 1328 Š./12 January 1950; the Guomintang mission in Kabul was then closed. It took five more years before full diplomatic relations between the two countries were restored, on 30 Jadī 1333 Š./20 January 1955, clear evidence that neither side had a strong interest in strengthening bilateral ties. In fact, China had initially chosen Pakistan as its primary ally in the region, and had established full diplomatic relations with Karachi as early as Ḥamal 1330 Š./April 1951; this alignment served to deter the development of friendly Sino-Afghan relations. Furthermore, subsequent Chinese interest in Afghanistan was simply one aspect of a broader regional policy, reflecting the ebb and flow of relations with the Soviet Union and Pakistan. In that sense the Beijing government has always considered Kabul a second-rank partner.

As relations between China and the Soviet Union deteriorated in the late 1330s Š./1950s the Chinese government took a more active interest in Afghan affairs. The new era of closer ties opened in 1335-36 Š./1957 with an exchange of official visits by Premier Chou En-lai (1898-1976) and Prime Minister Moḥammad Dā'ūd (q.v.; served 1332-41 Š./1953-63) and the signing of the first bilateral trade agreement between the two countries (Dupree, 1960, p. 6; "Prime Minister," *Afghanistan*). After the split between Beijing and Moscow (1339 Š./1960) the intensifying competition between the two Marxist powers became a determining factor in the foreign policies of both. For example, the



first rapprochement between China and Afghanistan was followed by the signing, in Kabul on 4 Sonbola 1339 Š./26 August 1960, of a ten-year treaty of friendship and mutual non-aggression. Three years later, on 1 Qaws 1342 Š./22 November 1963, a treaty for the formal demarcation of the common boundary between the two countries, extending 76 km in the Pamirs, was signed in Beijing (see [boundaries iii. boundaries of afghanistan](#)). This period of bilateral relations culminated with the exchange of state visits by Moḥammad Zāher Shah (r. 1322-52 Š./1933-73) on 7-21 'Aqrab 1343 Š./29 October-12 November 1964 and President Liu Shao-qi (1898-1969, pres. 1959-68) on 15-19 Ḥamal 1345 Š./4-8 April 1966 (Dupree, 1966, pp. 12ff.).

In the same period China for the first time extended economic and technical aid to Afghanistan. On 4 Ḥamal 1344 Š./24 March 1965 it granted an interest-free loan of \$28.5 million to help finance the Afghan government's third five-year plan (1346-50 Š./1967-72). As a consequence of this financial support, supplemented by Chinese technical assistance, several agricultural and industrial projects were initiated in Afghanistan. A cotton-weaving factory in the Kabul suburb of Bagrāmī was completed in 1349 Š./1970 (and subsequently enlarged; see [cotton](#)), and a lapis lazuli workshop was opened in Kabul. There were experiments in tea planting in the Konar valley (see [čāy](#)), carp breeding in Nangrahār (Darūnta artificial lake), and sericulture in Kabul (Reut, pp. 17-18). Particularly important was the Parwān irrigation project, which included construction of a dam 62 m long on the Panjšēr river at Golbahār (completed 1349 Š./1970), creation of a hydroelectric-power station with a capacity of 2,400 kw (completed 1355 Š./1976), and excavation of 85 km of canals to irrigate 24,800 ha of land, including 9,500 ha of virgin land (completed 1358 Š./1979) (*Prōže-ye ābyārī*; *Kabul Times*, 19 January 1977 and 8 December 1979; *Kabul New Times*, 30 March 1980).

China had thus become active in the competition among the great powers to influence the development of Afghanistan. By 1349 Š./1970 there were approximately 200 Chinese advisers in Afghanistan, the second largest foreign technical staff in the country (Dupree, 1971, p. 23). China was also the fourth largest provider of foreign aid, accounting for 7.2 percent of the total during the third five-year plan (after the Soviet Union, with 62.1 percent; the United States, with 13.9 percent; and the Federal Republic of Germany, with 10.5 percent). Although Chinese assistance to Afghanistan remained modest when compared with the Soviet contribution or with Chinese aid to other Asian countries, Afghan officials found it disproportionately valuable in political



terms as a counterbalance to the overwhelming Soviet presence (Vertzberger, 1982, p. 3). Chinese aid was, however, carefully restricted to the areas around Kabul and along the border with Pakistan, still China's main ally in the region.

In the 1350s Š./1970s the friendly relations between China and Afghanistan began to deteriorate, as Soviet influence in Afghan politics became more and more entrenched. A first chill followed the Soviet-backed republican coup of 1352 Š./1973, in which the former prime minister Moḥammad-Dā'ūd assumed the presidency of Afghanistan (see [afghanistan x. political history](#)). Although in Qaws 1353 Š./December 1974 Dā'ūd sent his brother Moḥammad Na'īm Khan as a special envoy to Beijing in order to improve relations, they remained distant; China extended only a small loan of \$20.7 million to help finance the new Afghan government's first seven-year plan (1355-61 Š./1976-83), a mere 0.7 percent of the total foreign aid scheduled for the period (World Bank, p. 97). As Dā'ūd's policies progressively diverged from those of Moscow, however, relations with China improved again; on 1 Ḥamal 1357 Š./21 March 1978 a protocol provided for a Chinese loan of 100 million yuan, to be used for construction of several industrial projects and for an increase in the small volume of trade between the two countries (Hammond, p. 40). This trade had reached a peak in 1348 Š./1969-70, when China provided 5 percent of total Afghan foreign exchange, \$10.8 million; in 1356 Š./1977-78 China's share had dwindled to less than 1 percent. Afghanistan imported mainly tea, textiles, machinery, and such consumer goods as bicycles, padlocks, and paper products from China; the value of Afghan exports to China (e.g., lapis lazuli, hides and skins, dried fruits) totaled even less.

The 1357 Š./1978 protocol became a dead letter, however, after the revolution of 7 Ṭawr 1357 Š./27 April 1978, which drew Afghanistan back into the Soviet orbit. The Chinese reaction was harsh, despite initial indications of support for Beijing from the new regime: a break with South Korea; establishment of diplomatic relations with North Korea; and appointment of several Afghan Maoist leaders, including Ṭāher Badaḳṣī, the most famous, to official positions. But these moves were apparently not enough to compensate for what China perceived as dependence on the Soviet Union; China only reluctantly recognized the new Afghan government on 17 Ṭawr/7 May (Dutt, p. 42).

Relations declined further after the signing of the Afghan-Soviet friendship treaty of 14 Qaws 1357 Š./5 December 1978. Not only did China react immediately by freezing economic aid to Afghanistan, but it also shifted to full support of anticommunist Afghan rebels (Dutt, pp. 43ff.). The final break came



in the next year, when the Chinese government, recognizing Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan as a threat to its own security, as well as to that of its ally Pakistan, expressed its strong condemnation and downgraded diplomatic representation in Kabul to the rank of chargé d'affaires. For the next decade Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was stipulated by China as one of the three key conditions for any improvement in Sino-Soviet relations (Holmes, p. 122). China immediately stepped up military aid to the Afghan guerrillas, possibly under American supervision (Hammond, p. 158). This aid has taken the form of massive shipments of arms, primarily small weapons like rifles, machine guns, and mines but also including some mortars and anti-aircraft missiles (Urban, p. 123). They have been delivered mainly through Pakistan via the new Karakoram highway, though at first they also went directly to Afghan *mojāhedīn* (freedom fighters) through the *Wākān* corridor along the old, but difficult, caravan route, which had been closed to traffic by the Chinese since 1329 Š./1950 (Urban, p. 25; Holmes, p. 130; Merriam, p. 73). It has been argued convincingly that this policy of shipping arms was directed less at the Afghan regime than at Soviet "hegemonism" (Vertzberger, 1982, p. 5).

According to official Afghan figures, Sino-Afghan trade during the 1360s Š./1980s has evolved to the advantage of the Chinese. Whereas Afghan exports to China have virtually ceased, imports have significantly increased, reaching the unprecedented total of \$33.8 million in 1365 Š./1986-87, 3.9 percent of all Afghan imports. In the same year exchanges between China and Afghanistan amounted to 2.4 percent of total Afghan foreign trade.

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