**Afghanistan Reachback Interim Report: Chinese and Russian News Media Coverage of Activities in Afghanistan**

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**Executive Summary**

 The largest take-away from the initial assessment of Chinese and Russian news media coverage related to Afghanistan is the lack of firmly established strategic narratives and the infrequency of coverage. From May 2018 to June 2018, less than 100 relevant articles were devoted to detailed coverage of activities in Afghanistan from both Russian and Chinese news media. However, despite the lack of frequency and strategic narratives tied to larger national myths, there were several relevant findings that are of contribution to the overall SMA effort, as well as narrative themes that are insightful.

 Primarily, the notion of a grand bargain between the United States and either Russia or China appears a difficult proposition taking into account the media coverage of both nations. The news media of these nations both present non-Western organizations such as the SCO and CSTO, as well as regional relations, as the preferred means of pursuing economic investment and achieving political stability within Afghanistan. Media from both nations avoid advocation of any type of direct military intervention or activities toward achieving stability in Afghanistan, with Chinese news media more focused on economic investment and linkages of Afghanistan to its One-Belt, One-Road initiatives while Russian news media highlights cooperative dialogue between Afghani political leadership and the Taliban as a sensible avenue toward stability. News media present both nations as taking a cautious approach towards dealings with Afghanistan, though Russian concern for the instability in Afghanistan and terrorist group infighting leading to a proliferation of terrorism in areas within its direct sphere of influence is considerable. While Chinese news media and Russian news media both cover sporadic violence within Afghanistan, Chinese news media present this violence as instructive warnings against military activity within the country; while Russian news media more readily blames the violence and instability in Afghanistan (and greater ME) on the US and its interventionist policies. While the stability of Afghanistan is seen as a concern for both nations, news media from neither nation in anyway attempts to demonstrate overtures toward cooperation with the United States toward achieving that stability.

Of note methodologically, the initial report presented here details recent coverage (from May 1 through June 2018) of Afghanistan through Chinese and Russian news media harvested using the multi-media monitoring system (M3S). A quantitative coding scheme addressing the specific questions posed to the SMA groups was applied to all articles, as well as a qualitative strategic narrative analysis. The key-terms used for searches across both Chinese and Russian news media were “Afghanistan” (Russian news media, n=35) and “Afghanistan cooperation” (Chinese news media, n=68); a systematic random sample with a confidence interval of 95% and acceptable margin of error of 5% was then taken from each news media population.

This interim report is divided into the following subsections

* Thematic Narratives within News Media Coverage
* Comparisons to Previous News Media Coverage
* Insights and Grand Bargain Potentials
* Coded News Coverage Breakdowns

**Thematic Narratives within News Media Coverage**

**Chinese news media portrayals of Afghanistan depicted four principle thematic narratives:**

* First, Afghanistan suffers from constant instability at the hands of the Taliban.
* Second, military engagement in Afghanistan serves a cautionary tale for any country attempting military involvement there.
* Third, Afghanistan has significant historical and cultural value as part of the historical Silk Road trade routes, both of which can be important for Chinese interests today.
* Fourth, China’s primary engagement with Afghanistan is through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization whereby its members are engaging in discussions to support and or include Afghan security and stability as part of the SCO’s regional multilateral architecture.

**Russian news media portrayals of Afghanistan depicted three principle thematic narratives:**

* First, concerns over the continued instability and terrorist infighting within Afghanistan allowing for a springboard of terrorists proliferating into other areas (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) leading to destabilization and further regional conflicts.
* Second, stability in Afghanistan involving dialogue with the Taliban and a peaceful process of cooperation and unity with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization through investment and the protection of Collective Security Treaty Organization controlled areas.
* The instability of Afghanistan, and continued issues of establishing peace, are results of actions by the United States and its heavy military presence in the region, as well as ambiguous and uncooperative operations undertaken by NATO forces.

**Comparisons to Previous News Media Coverage**

**Comparison of previous analyses of Chinese news media portrayals of its interests[[1]](#endnote-1) to those of China’s interests in Afghanistan demonstrate a few insights into Chinese thinking about the country and region.**

* First, the depth and quality of analysis of Chinese media coverage of Afghanistan is considerably nondescript with a focus on recent attacks made by the Taliban, rather than a discussion of larger Chinese strategic interests.
* Second, China’s principal mode of engagement with Afghanistan is a cautionary one. Emphasis is placed upon multilateral engagement with regional partners through the SCO rather than bilateral relationship development between China and Afghanistan. This engagement is described more as abstract capacity building of the SCO’s institutional architecture rather than inclusion of specific, tangible Chinese interests and policies.
* Third, and related to the first and second aforementioned insights is the lack of Chinese criticism or commentary on US strategic goals in Afghanistan. This in combination with China’s focus on engagement through the SCO, an organization originally set up as an alternative security alliance mechanism to NATO, makes determination of a “Grand Bargain” with the US limited.
* Fourth, although Chinese interests in Afghanistan is rather nondescript, there are indications that China would like to strengthen Afghanistan’s stability and infrastructure as part of its One-Belt, One-Road or New Silk Road initiatives. Furthermore, Chinese media engages in some cultural public diplomacy messaging strategies emphasizing Afghanistan’s culture in positive ways. This messaging strategy has been found to be employed by Chinese to augment their influence with other nations through a strategy of identification between China’s resurging cultural prestige with others’.
* Fifth, China’s engagement with Pakistan and India shows some confidence in Chinese-Pakistan relations evident by Pakistan’s inclusion of the SCO. This has likely opened up China’s ability to begin resolving some of its tensions with India, with cooperation, or at least initial dialogue, between China and India focusing on promoting stability in Afghanistan.

**Comparison of previous analyses of Russian news media portrayals of its interests to those of Russia’s interests in Afghanistan demonstrate a few insights into Russian thinking about the country and region.**

* First, similar to the findings of the Chinese news media analysis for this outreach, the sporadic coverage and lack of concretely established narrative frameworks within previously identified Russian national myths is the most notable finding.
* Second, coverage of Afghanistan revolves around non-Western organizational unity toward greater regional stability and economic viability particularly in reference to the CSTO and SCO.
* Third, the concern for stability reflects a larger concern for continued instability in Afghanistan (particularly in the north) to allow for a so-called “springboard” of terrorism which is very loosely and broadly defined throughout the coverage; further, there seems a reluctance to even mention direct military interventions in Afghanistan, opting instead for calls for cooperation and dialogue among Afghani leadership and the Taliban toward a stable peace and reintegration of Taliban fighters into the political fold.
* Fourth, more consistent with previous SMA projects on Russian news media coverage, there is a presence of anti-Western rhetoric. Rather than establishing a concrete narrative however, the anti-Western rhetoric takes the form of occasional jabs at the US for being responsible for destabilization across the ME; noting its heavy military presence and lack of success in restoring order in the places to which it has directed military intervention. There is also mention of NATO operations threatening CSTO zones of stability and hints at NATO attempts to undermine what limited security exists in the region.

**Insights and Grand Bargain Potentials**

**These insights drawn from China’s media portrayals of Afghanistan suggest the following drivers of Chinese decision calculus:**

* Limited involvement in Afghanistan. Chinese frequently point out how previous powers have become bogged down in Afghanistan, that Afghanistan still experiences significant instability at the hands of Taliban, and that Chinese interests directly related to Afghanistan remain vague.
* Use of Afghanistan as driver for strengthening Chinese regional partnerships through the SCO.
* Some strategic value in developing stability of Afghanistan as a means to support Chinese One-Belt, One-Road initiative as well as a tool for beginning to build relations with India.

Grand Bargain/Key ways for US to engage China:

* Potential for Grand Bargain with US is limited.
	+ Chinese engagement with Afghanistan remains outside of US influence through its use of regional relations and SCO.
	+ Chinese interests are nondescript and commentary on US interests are similarly missing or vague demonstrating a general disinterest or lack of strategic focus on Afghanistan.
	+ Instability of Afghanistan is more of a tool for Chinese engagement of regional partners through the SCO and as a means to resolve tensions with India
* Appeal to Chinese interests in One-Belt, One-Road in Afghanistan.
	+ One-Belt, One-Road initiative is one of China’s key strategic concerns in the region.
	+ Stability and infrastructure development in Afghanistan helps China realize its One-Belt, One-Road initiative.
* US regional support of SCO initiatives in Afghanistan
	+ Chinese principle engagement in region is through SCO, not US policy or strategic interests.
	+ China has an interest in strengthening its regional partnerships.

**These insights drawn from Russian’s news media portrayals of Afghanistan suggest the following drivers of Russian decision calculus:**

* Apprehension that instability and infighting among various terrorist groups in Afghanistan (particularly in the north) can lead to a springboard of terrorism in other areas more central to Russian security concerns.
* Willingness to bring Taliban into political dialogue toward a more stable peace, while working with non-Western organizations (CSTO & SCO) toward greater security and economic development; avoidance of mentions of direct military intervention.
* Placing the instability of Afghanistan into a larger context of failed US-led military interventions in the ME to potentially justify the need for non-Western led solutions.

Grand Bargain/Key ways for US to engage Russia:

* Potential for Grand Bargain with US is limited.
	+ Russian engagement with Afghanistan is intentionally oriented toward non-Western organizations; specifically, the CSTO & SCO.
	+ Russian news media uses the US as a scapegoat for the instability in Afghanistan and much of the broader ME.
* Appeal toward the calls for broader transparency and cooperation between NATO forces in CSTO regions of control and influence.
* US regional support of SCO initiatives in Afghanistan.
* US support in bringing cooperative dialogue with Taliban toward stability.

**Coded News Coverage Breakdowns**

Chinese News Media Coverage Breakdown

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| What are the potential Russian/Chinese options regarding their interference/participation in Afghanistan | How could China/Russia affect Pakistan/ Afghanistan? What drives the decision calculus? How do they view Afghanistan | Is a grand bargain possible with U.S. and other nations (or other permutations) manifestitself in Afghanistan/Pakistan?  | Stability in Afghanistan |
| 16/55, 29.1% | 17/55, 30.1% | 0/55, 0% | 25/55, 45.5% |

Russian News Media Coverage Breakdown

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| What are the potential Russian/Chinese options regarding their interference/participation in Afghanistan | How could China/Russia affect Pakistan/ Afghanistan? What drives the decision calculus? How do they view Afghanistan | Is a grand bargain possible with U.S. and other nations (or other permutations) manifestitself in Afghanistan/Pakistan?  | Stability in Afghanistan |
| 13/33, 39.4% | 12/33, 36.3% | 7/33, 21.2% | 10/33, 30.3% |

1. Hinck, R. S., Kluver, R., & Cooley, S. (2017). *Media Visions of the Gray Zone: Contrasting Geopolitical Narratives in Russian and Chinese Media*. Prepared for the Pentagon’s Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment: *Gray Zone Conflicts, Challenges, and Opportunities.*

Hinck, R., Chinn, J., Kluver, R., & Norris, W. (October 20, 2014). *Geopolitical Dimensions of the New Style of Great Power Relations.*Prepared for the Pentagon's Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment Report: *Drivers of Conflict and Convergence in the Asia-Pacific Region in the Next 5-25 Years.*

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*Foreign Policy*. Prepared for the Pentagon's Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment Report: *Drivers of Conflict and Convergence in the Asia-Pacific Region in the Next 5-25 Years.* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)