

Media Narrative Analysis: Iranian, Russian, and Chinese News Coverage of the Future of Afghanistan.

Phase III Integrated Report

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Executive Summary

This project analyzed Chinese, Russian, and Iranian media narratives concerning interests in, and future prospects of, Afghanistan stability through three phases: Phase I (May-June, 2018; 79 articles), Phase II, (July-August, 2018; 124 articles), Phase III (October-September, 2018; 180 articles). Across these three phases, the analysis revealed consistent narrative patterns regarding the following:

- Chinese, Russian, and Iranian media present their interests in Afghanistan in realpolitik terms: stability is only desired in Afghanistan in so much as it augments their respective, individual, influence in the region.
- Investment in Afghanistan is proposed to occur through multilateral and regional ties with neighboring nations, often seen as alternative means to stabilize Afghanistan outside of US influence.
- US Afghan policy is portrayed as ineffective, both historically and under the Trump administration; consensus among media that the US withdrawal is likely. US presence in Afghanistan is shown as the main driver of instability and serving only US interests.
- No long-term vision of an independent, capable Afghanistan government; nor political desire to substantially get involved in stabilization attempts aimed at improving Afghani governance.
- Iran most interested in investing in Afghanistan as augmentation of their influence and to counter US interests.

General Findings Across Media

The project examined 383 news articles across May-October 2018 from Chinese, Russian, and Iranian news media specifically discussing Afghanistan. All three nations present US influence in Afghanistan as declining, yet reluctant to accept the need to negotiate with the Taliban and accept that continued US presence in the country only prolongs an unalterable status quo of dangerous violence. Media from all three countries make calls for a recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate political authority to be negotiated with, call for a more cooperative international system with non-Western leadership to aid in stabilizing the region through political and economic investment, and for the US to rethink its strategy in Afghanistan and approach to the Taliban.

Projections of the future are limited to the near future, not long-term stability. These short-term projections depict a focus by Chinese, Russian, and Iranian media on practical ways to attempt to end the current conflict, with the most common agreement among these media systems being that the future holds an Afghanistan largely controlled by the Taliban with US and Afghani government control reduced to a few high-density urban areas.

Iranian media stressed more political and economic interests than that of the other two media systems and offers that the socio-economic stability of regional actors surrounding Afghanistan is an important means to stabilize Afghanistan itself. Regional economic and political security against Western powers is of stated concern in Iranian media.

Chinese media offer mentions of regional investments with nations such as Pakistan, India, Russia, the larger Islamic community, and through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as well as through limited expansion of the Belt and Road Initiatives toward similar trickle-through pathways to Afghanistan stability.

While Russian media mentions similar economic type investments through SCO and BRICS as China, the discussion on Afghanistan in Russia largely is used to make a case against the United States and its global leadership.

General Findings by Country

Iranian Media Coverage

Iranian media present Afghanistan with greater specificity and nuance, making note of warlord leaders and the role their alliances have in peace and conflict, as well as making mention of all the various state and non-state actors operating within the country. More than anything, Afghanistan is described as a nation divided between the Taliban and the United States, with the role of the Afghani government shown as respectable, but often sidelined. Few negative portrayals are made of the Taliban. Although there are attempts to distance Iran of direct support of Taliban military actions that destabilize the region, the Taliban are shown as practical reality of power in Afghanistan. The US is shown as an exiting occupier struggling to come to terms with the Taliban having power and drawing out the conflict as a result. There are calls for the US to rethink its strategy in Afghanistan and orient forces toward establishing peace.

Iranian media stresses concerns related to practical proximity (such as drug smuggling issues and refugees), as well as the need for cooperation with Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq toward greater regional and economic security to buffer against Western interventions and terrorist threats. The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) is discussed as a framework for investment and economic growth that will lead to greater security; to help fund reconstruction of Afghanistan. Iranian media point out the importance of regional strength against Western powers and attempts to present itself as invested in achieving regional security through cooperation. Iran is presented as a nation that continues to genuinely want to help Afghanistan recover.

Iranian media offer the perspective that the Taliban should be brought in for discussions with both the US and the Afghan government; and that the coordination and cooperation with other regional actors and warlords requires that the Afghan government and Taliban be able to establish some type of workable solution with one another if the US role is to be diminished. The blame for the upheaval in Afghanistan, and the region, is placed squarely on the US. Iranian media claim US military involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria has turned these countries into breeding grounds for terrorism. There is a noted point to distance Iranian actions as catalyst to, or in support of, terrorism.

Long-term peace is characterized only as a vague notion of somehow ending the perpetual violence cycles and the stalemated war. The only constant in this presentation of peace is that a long-term solution in Afghanistan reflects US troops losing resolve and leaving the Afghans to themselves in coming to terms with one another. Peace includes a reworking of international powers operating in the region and commitments to peace and dialogue. There are arguments that a socio-economic path to peace is a sensible one and that investment and stabilization of Pakistan may benefit that path eventually in Afghanistan. However, Iranian interest appears less interested in an independent and functional Afghani government, and instead an Afghanistan where Iranian influence and regional ties augments its own influence and security.

Russian Media Coverage

Russian media present Afghanistan in constant chaos amid a power struggle between the US and Taliban. The Afghani government is shown as a puppet regime with little to no legitimacy, contrasted to the Taliban who are shown as a viable political and military body capable of making direct demands to the US. Afghanistan is also shown as being unable to lead itself toward peace because of the presence and selfish desires of the United States. The failure of a peace summit in Moscow, in which Russian officials offered to broker discussion with other international actors between the Taliban and Afghani government, was blamed explicitly on the United States. The election violence was covered regularly and was claimed as demonstrating the spiraling chaos in which Afghanistan had no military solution. Calls were made for a “reality check” in Afghanistan, for the US and the rest of the world to recognize that the Taliban are a genuine political power in the country and that it is time to discuss how to best end the conflict.

Russian media claim the US is maintaining control over relative stability in Kabul and a number of cities as an operational goal, creating the illusion of a centralized Afghan state and giving US infrastructure and communication control. This allows for the manipulation by the US of the main actors involved in the Afghan political process and suggests that a significant part of US Afghan policy is aimed at realizing the regional interests of the United States. Russian media claim part of US interest in Afghanistan is to influence the Central Asian republics in ways counter to Russian interests.

Regardless of stated commitments, the US is shown as in retraction in Afghanistan with the Taliban currently in control of up to 50% of the country. The media claims that the US aims are to hold only a few urban cities and prop up the Afghani government in those areas (Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad). Long term projections see the Taliban as controlling all but a handful of large urban cities and eventually commanding up to 70% of the country; equally as likely is that the Taliban end up in complete control of the country depending on their path to political legitimacy and whether or not it is brokered through dialogue or kinetic conflict.

Russian media mentions a growing concern for terrorist groups, including the Islamic State organization, that have stepped up activities in the northern provinces of Afghanistan; threatening the countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Migration to Central Asian republics is shown as a concern for Russia, and calls are made to create a single

regional analytical center for security in Afghanistan, which would solve problems of coordinating the efforts of the countries of Central Asia and the whole world in the fight against international terrorism. Russian media present the issues of terrorism and migration as the main motivators for interests in Afghanistan.

Beyond terrorism and migration, Russian concerns associated with the security of Afghanistan are largely economic when explicitly stated; relating to the economic trade blocs and alliances Russia takes part in. As is common in Russian coverage relating to items with US involvement, alternative powers in the form of the SCO, BRICS, China and Russia offer dialogue and seek stability; in contrast to US perpetuation of war to fulfill its own interests. Afghanistan is used to show Russia as offering sensible peace to the world and seeking a multi-polar world order built on compromise and cooperation.

Chinese Media Coverage

Chinese media present Afghanistan as a nation in the midst of failing US policies that have led to a practical reality of the Taliban being the de-facto ruling power that must be brought to the bargaining table in order to achieve stability. The Afghanistan government is shown as incapable and completely reliant on the US, with the role of Iranian and Russian alliances with the Taliban altering the balance of power. The US is shown as a source of greater regional instability and as maintaining a violent and unalterable status quo in Afghanistan. The Taliban's violent reaction to the Afghanistan elections were viewed as potentially undermining their ability to negotiate with the US while the Afghanistan people were seen as valiantly committed to democracy, risking their lives to vote out corrupt Afghani officials.

Discussion of grand bargains and long-term solutions within Chinese media are vague, and include Taliban buy-in and a reduction of the US' role. Chinese investment in Afghanistan is present, but limited. Chinese media narratives suggest China is willing to play constructive multilateral role in stabilizing Afghanistan, but remains uninterested in unilaterally promoting stabilization of Afghanistan and the Afghan government. Chinese media suggests that China is interested in building partnerships with Pakistan, India, Russia, the larger Islamic community, and through multilateral organizations such as the SCO in addressing Afghanistan stability and economic development. This investment is part of strengthening Chinese regional partnerships and some limited investment as part of its One Belt, One Road initiative.

Consistency and Shifts of Narratives from Phase II to Phase III

We conducted a third analysis of Chinese, Russian, and Iranian media from October-September, 2018 (180 articles) in order to trace the consistency and changes of the narratives present in the prior two phases. Topically the narratives in Phase III overwhelmingly reported on the violence during the Afghani elections. Discussion of this topic largely followed and thus confirmed the narrative themes found in prior studies, with a few minor changes. Below are the summaries of the consistency and shifts found between Phase II and Phase III.

Iran: Consistency in narratives

- Continued reporting on ineffectual US policies, US overextension and self-interested policies in Afghanistan and worldwide.
- Continued blame of US for instability of Afghanistan and region.
- Continued coverage of Iranian goodwill and aid toward Afghanistan.
- Continued coverage of the need for non-Western regional security and economic networks.
- Continued coverage of practical interactions with Iran due to proximity (drug smuggling, refugees, visa issues, etc.)

Iran: Narrative Shifts

- Increased coverage of violence and suffering in Afghanistan during the election.
- Increased coverage of the importance of the Economic Cooperation Organization and other Iranian economic initiatives related to Afghanistan; including mentions of Iranian exports to Afghanistan and opening of Iranian ports that could aid Afghanistan.
- Increased coverage of need for shared regional energy infrastructure, and an Iranian energy hub to serve reconstruction of Afghanistan and the region.

Russia: Consistency in narratives

- Continued reporting on ineffectual US policies, US overextension and self-interested policies in Afghanistan and worldwide.
- Continued blame of US for instability of Afghanistan.
- Taliban shown as legitimate political power and as the real authority of Afghanistan.
- Presentation of Russia as a peace broker and in partnership with China, India, and other nations to develop a peaceful solution.
- Continued interests in multi-polar cooperation that displaces US global leadership; cooperation with non-Western led economic organizations to invest in Afghanistan.

Russia: Narrative Shifts

- Increased support for Chinese investment in, and reconstruction of, Afghanistan.
- Increased concern for terrorist threats and migration to Central Asia republics coming from Afghanistan.
- Increased coverage of conspiratorial role of the US in Afghani political violence.

China: Consistency in narratives

- Prominence of One-Belt, One-Road rhetoric as goal for Chinese investment in Afghanistan.
- Continued use of Afghanistan as means to build Chinese relations with India, Pakistan, and Russia.
- Continued reporting on ineffectual US policies, US overextension and self-interested policies in Afghanistan and world-wide.
- Continued lack of concrete policy and investment plans by China to strengthen Afghan government.
- Continued criticism and portrayal of Afghan government as weak and ineffectual.

China: Narrative shifts

- Crystallization of limited Chinese investment in Afghanistan (political and economic) through solely multilateral organizations.
- Favorable coverage of Afghani people and clear support for democratic expression.
- Taliban displeasure and violent actions against Afghani elections; portrayal of Taliban actions as undermining Taliban peace process.

Methodology

This analysis looked specifically into Iranian, Russian, and Chinese news media coverage of Afghanistan related to mentions of regional/direct investment, security concerns related to Afghanistan, grand bargain agreements and related state/non-state actors, the role of the United States in Afghanistan, and the long-term prospects of stability in the nation. The analysis also looked specifically at issue, national, and international level strategic narratives presented by these media systems when covering Afghanistan. The study analyzed 383 news articles from over 30 Russian, Iranian, and Chinese sources using the Media Monitoring System (M3S) and the Factiva online database. The data bases were selected because they provide access to the most circulated native language publications in these nations, as well as aggregation tools that allow for translations and summaries of the data. These processes make searching for and sampling for key terms statistically possible, the range of sources available also ensures a complete scope of perspective concerning a topic from a given nation. Researchers randomly sampled (90% CI, 10% MoE) around the key term “Afghanistan” for all data pulls. More specific key terms were sometimes used if qualitative reads of the data warranted further analysis of a subject (for example, “election violence”). Coders developed and tested a statistically reliable coding instrument for the analysis and examined articles dating from May 2018 to October 2018.

PHASE III Detailed Findings:

Iranian Media Phase III Details

Iranian Economic Interests Related to Afghanistan

- Imran Khan calls for closer relationship with Iran and Pakistan, as well as forging a relationship based on mutual trust with India and Afghanistan.”
- Rouhani stresses that Iran wishes a better, more developed and safer future for Afghanistan, adding that deepening Tehran-Kabul relations is beneficial for both nations in all stages. President Hassan Rouhani said, security of regional countries, including Iran and Afghanistan is interrelated to each other and the presence of foreigners in this region is detrimental to all of us. Rouhani emphasized economic relations, cooperation in securing the borders and encouraging the private sectors to expand trade relations. Claims that cooperation of Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq can lead to much greater regional security and buffer against Western intervention and their double standard toward terrorism.
- Iran stresses the importance of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) to help bolster regional economic, environmental, and political security. Iran's idea to establish an electricity market between member nations.

- Iranian leaders repeatedly assert US unilateral sanctions are illegal, and claim the security of Middle East must be maintained by regional countries.
- ECO seen as a framework of investment and economic growth that will lead to greater security; will help fund reconstruction of Afghanistan.
- Iran's exports to Afghanistan and Iraq will reach close to \$12.5 million by March 2019.
- India discussed areas of marine and ports cooperation and the possibility of expanding ties on the southern Iranian port of Chabahar. Indian Shipping and Transport Minister described the port as a growth engine for India to access Afghanistan and Russia. Chabahar Agreement which is going to be developed between Islamic Republic of Iran, India and Afghanistan and said, with the coordination made in this regard, members of this strategic agreement will be increased.
- Iran' growing energy relations with neighbors have helped it to develop the infrastructure needed to expand its electricity export destinations and put it in a position to realize its goals. However, vast improvements are needed to the transport infrastructure and connectivity of countries of the region, as well as the development of maternal industries, such as the electricity industry and energy exports. Iran's energy hub plans hope to help revitalize and reconstruct region, Afghanistan specifically mentioned.

Afghanistan Unstable

- Coverage of election violence by Taliban in Afghanistan. Discusses number of militants killed (500) and weapons found in Nangarhar province over the past 6 months. Coverage of explosions in various regions in Afghanistan, as well as causality numbers.
- Coverage of violence against journalists surging in Afghanistan and government facing heat for failing to safeguard their rights. Calls for more protections of Afghani journalists needed. "The increase in targeted attacks on the media and the deterioration in the security situation for women journalists in the run-up to the elections threaten the Afghan people's sovereignty and democratic choice," said Reza Moini, the head of RSF's Afghanistan-Iran desk.
- Notes women participation in voting in Afghanistan. Notes that voting for the parliamentary elections in Afghanistan have been met with vicious, daily violence from Taliban and ISIL. The violence underlines the dangers throughout Afghanistan; parliament is seen as a test ahead of next year' more important presidential election but the run-up is marred by chaotic preparations, accusations of cheating and militant violence.
- Claims that Russian intelligence has warned recruits from Central Asia are prepared to destabilize Afghanistan.

Iranian Dealings with the Afghani People and Its Hope for Their Future

- Claims Iran has been a critical life line for Afghani refugees and students, despite not getting much assistance from the Afghanistan government. Notes Iran helped cooperate with Iraq on behalf of Afghani pilgrims.
- Tehran believes that the election in Afghanistan was a positive move towards stabilization of democracy leading to rampant security, stability and development in the neighboring country. Notes Iran's happy to see Afghanistan on stable track.
- Stories of Afghan refugees who defy odds to become accomplished professionals in Iran.

- Awarded film, drama about the plight of a family of Afghan refugees living in Iran, realized with great economy and emotional power.
- Afghani armed group of drug smugglers are defeated by Iran border guards. Lots of Afghans in Iranian jails for drug smuggling, working on extradition procedures.
- Iran and Afghanistan have a disagreement over allocation of water from the Hirmand River, as both sides suffer from droughts and climate change.

The US as Responsible for Afghanistan's Suffering

- Accusations that the United States of transferring Daesh terrorists to Afghanistan on a number of occasions in the past.
- Claim that General Raziq killed because he was an obstacle to US Taliban peace. Raziq was seen as a staunch US ally in southern Afghanistan, many observers believe he had become a liability because of his dogged opposition to peace talks with the Taliban. Claims for Americans, there can be no permanent friends or foes; examples of Saddam Hussain and Muammar Gaddafi before us. Claim the attack could have been orchestrated and executed jointly by the US and Taliban to get rid of the formidable anti-Taliban commander.
- The US Military Industrial Complex is the single biggest threat to the world peace and stability. Both Republican and Democratic parties unquestioningly support it. Iraq and Afghanistan in 2001 are proof that the warmongers of America are not a stabilizing force in the world, but a destabilizing one.
- US waging economic, psychological and media warfare against Iran. Claims that US defeats in Afghanistan and Iraq have curtailed attempts to attack Iran.
- US military involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria has turned these countries into breeding grounds for terrorism. Iran had nothing to do with these failed states.
- India has also worked with both Iran and Russia in an attempt to improve the security situation in Afghanistan, where the Taliban Islamist militant group has challenged a 17-year, U.S.-led war effort. Last month, India and Russia joined Iran's first-ever Regional Security Dialogue, which also included Afghanistan and China.
- Bearing testimony to America's disastrous venture in Afghanistan, in the 24 hours corresponding with the 17th anniversary of its invasion, at least 54 people were killed across the war-ravaged country, including 35 Afghan security forces and 19 civilians. It is a grim reminder that the war has only got deadlier with time and the Taliban has managed to reinvent itself, belying tall claims of the US generals that the insurgency was waning in Afghanistan.
- Seventeen years down the line, almost 56.3 percent of Afghanistan's districts are currently under government control and at least 30 percent of districts are contested, according to a recent SIGAR report. And, there have been reports recently about secret negotiations between the US government and the Taliban in Qatar, which seems to suggest that the world's biggest military has surrendered before the Taliban in Afghanistan after 17 years of futile war and bloodshed. The only way out is for the US troops to go home and let Afghans take charge of their country.
- There can be no military solution to the fighting in Afghanistan, the United Nations renews its call for an immediate and peaceful settlement to the conflict, 8,050 Afghan civilians were killed or wounded in the first nine months of 2018. Seventeen years after US forces led a campaign to overthrow the Taliban following the September 11 attacks

on New York and Washington, the figures underline how dire the security situation remains.

Russian Media Phase III Details

Afghanistan in Upheaval/Terrorist Threat

- Large amount of coverage devoted to American commanders being attacked by Taliban and election violence in Afghanistan.
- Claims situation in Afghanistan has recently dramatically escalated. Almost every day, clashes take place in various parts of the country, the victims of which are policemen, military personnel, officers of the Afghan national security forces and civilians.
- Security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated amid preparations for the parliamentary elections scheduled for October 20. Security forces are responding to frequent attacks.
- Taliban hold real power in the country, and they are the ones capable of stopping the Islamic State threat, not the American or Afghani government forces. Claim Taliban consider Afghani government a puppet.
- Claims terrorist groups, including the Islamic State organization, have stepped up their activities in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, which threaten the countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Special concern is expressed in connection with the activities and increase in the number of groups of ISIS and other terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, including in the northern provinces of the country, which creates challenges and threats to the collective security of the CSTO.
- Claims the actions of international terrorists in Afghanistan have become a factor in the degradation of the situation in the country, threatening a repetition of the Syrian scenario there. Stressed that the Afghan crisis has no military solution, and the only way to solve political problems there is to achieve a general Afghan agreement by political means with active international assistance.
- Calls for a reality check in Afghanistan for the US and the rest of the world in discussing what the Taliban a genuine political power in the country and how to best end the conflict.

Blame

- The US and Western countries are acting in accordance with their plan, which has not led to positive results for the past 17 years. At the same time, the Afghan people, and the whole world, hear that the situation is improving, the militants suffer great losses and are morally broken, but the result remains unchanged — the war continues, the civilian population is still dying, the number of victims is increasing, the production of drugs has increased unprecedented.
- Mentions the death of Abdul Jabar Qahraman and others may be beneficial to the country's president, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, since they were among groups of Afghan politicians who are in opposition to Ghani and harshly criticize the presidential course.
- Claims, the Americans, as their operational tactical task, see maintaining control over relative stability in Kabul and a number of cities, creating the illusion of a centralized Afghan state. The strategic task is to maintain control at the “entry points”, which literally means leading airports and land border crossings. In the geopolitical sense, this is total control over communications and the manipulation of the main actors of the Afghan

political process, the actions of a significant part of the external participants of the Afghan policy aimed at realizing the regional interests of the United States.

- Argues Afghan processes remain the focus of external stakeholders, among which the US has a blank check. None of the Afghan politicians raise the issue of the withdrawal of foreign military forces from the country and do not refuse US financial support.

Foreign Interests and Alliances related to Afghanistan

- Claim certain forces (the West) would like to use their potential, first of all, to create a bridgehead in northern Afghanistan to influence the Central Asian republics. Claims the West is attempting to turn the world against Russia via propaganda, even when they are trying to help in Afghanistan.
- U.S. bolsters its relations with Azerbaijani and claims to want to see the nation prosperous, notes Azerbaijani army was sent to Afghanistan in order to continue serving in the mission “Resolute support”.
- United States shown as highly appreciative of the contribution of Azerbaijan to security in Afghanistan.
- Discusses India and Tajiki concern over the security situation in Afghanistan and the high level of violence from all terrorist groups. Claims Tajikistan and India will continue their bilateral and multilateral cooperation in promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan.
- Discusses Chinese support for an Afghani led peace process, Chinese want to reconstruct Afghanistan, notes cooperation with China in field of economics, trade, electricity generation, agriculture, in the fight against terrorism, and also to take an active part in trilateral cooperation with China and Pakistan.
- Claims that China supports the active participation of companies with Chinese capital in infrastructure construction in Afghanistan. China sees Afghanistan stability as important to the region for its own trade purposes.
- Covers delegations from Russia, Afghanistan, India, Iran and China took part in multilateral consultations through the security councils.

Russia’s role in, and concerns for, Afghanistan

- Claims Russian Federation hopes that Russia, Afghanistan, India, Iran and China will be able to establish a regular interaction mechanism for resolving the Afghan situation through secretaries of security councils
- Claims in many countries, a powerful propaganda campaign has been launched against Russia, and it appears that Afghanistan, where the interests of Russia and the West have crossed over many years, is no exception.
- Covers Russian overtures to Iran to help solve terrorist problem in Afghanistan.
- Russia notes external threats to security in the Central Asian direction come from international terrorist organizations and incessant armed clashes in Afghanistan. Believes it is necessary to create a single regional analytical center for security in Afghanistan, which will solve the problems of coordinating the efforts of the countries of Central Asia and the whole world in the fight against international terrorism. Claims successful response to modern migration challenges requires, first of all, the prevention and political settlement of conflicts, coordination of the efforts of the world community in political, socio-economic, humanitarian, and other areas.

Chinese Media Phase III Details

Chinese investment in Afghanistan

- Chinese investment in Afghanistan continues to be present, but limited. Chinese media narratives suggest China is willing to play a constructive multilateral role in stabilizing Afghanistan, but remains uninterested in unilaterally promoting stabilization of Afghan government.
- Clearer description of level of Chinese willingness to engage in Afghanistan: clear support and interest in promoting security, stability, economic, and diplomatic investments. However, all of this is discussed in multilateral systems, suggesting China has little interest in unilaterally owning the Afghanistan issue.
- China is working with Indian partners, Pakistani partners, Islamic world, and Russia through the SCO institution.

Afghan security

- Frequently reports of violence and attacks. Taliban attacks and Islamic State attacks suggest US ability to stabilize Afghanistan has not succeeded.
- Mixed support and critique of security forces: Some success in fighting Taliban and terrorists, still more instances of violence and inability to stabilize whole of Afghanistan.

Kabul government and Afghani citizens

- **Elections:** Afghanistan citizens support democratic election of officials. Demonstrates optimism that they can vote out corrupt officials and willingness to vote despite Taliban opposition and threat of force. Positive portrayal of Afghan people and their desire to engage in democracy.
- **Kabul government:** Afghanistan government's running of elections were mixed: on one hand, elections viewed as a success with large number of Afghani's being able to vote. On the other hand, Afghani government viewed as incompetent in setting up some voting and biometric voting mechanisms. Furthermore, mixed portrayal on ability to safeguard polling stations. Majority were able to vote, but significant number of areas unable to be safeguarded.

Taliban

- Taliban attacks during Afghani election caused significant chaos and destruction slightly undermining their ability to negotiate with other powers, although willingness to work with Taliban remains. Afghani population was still able and expressed significant motivation to vote, primarily as a means to vote out the perceived corrupt Afghani government officials.
- Taliban clearly not in favor of elections. View it as illegitimate coming from outside forces and non-Islamic practices.
- Taliban boycott and violence undermines negotiation with US.
- Pakistan still interested in negotiating with Taliban.

US role/portrayal

- US is continued to be viewed negatively with regards to failed Afghan policies. Afghanistan is seen as another example of US over-extension and decline.

- US is further seen as a self-interested and overly aggressive nation unfairly challenging and undermining Chinese interests globally and in the region.
 - Negative US portrayals include it being described as weak, short sighted, trying to contain China, abuses international rules in their favor, morally bankrupt, ineffectual policies, inconsistent policies by still willing to work with Taliban which is viewed as undermining the democratic process which Afghan citizens support; and characterizations that the US is “addicted to sanctions and aggression policies”.
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PHASE II Findings

Iranian Detailed Findings

Investment in Afghanistan

- Overall little investment into Afghanistan, with most common investment discussed as political.
- Major investors include Iran—mostly political but some economic; India—working with Iran to provide some political and economic investment.
- Notes socio-economic path to peace is sensible and that investment and stabilization of Pakistan may benefit that path eventually in Afghanistan.
- Political investment and support for ceasefire; notes that the larger powers which have made political commitments in the region have ultimately led to power vacuums.
- Some mentioning of military investment by NATO countries.
- Notes US making commitments to Afghanistan government.

Security Concerns

- Less discussion of insecurity in Afghanistan relative to Chinese discussions.
- Security concerns arise from evident US plans for withdrawing from Afghanistan and the power vacuums created by larger powers.
- Some concerns regarding ISIL and terrorist groups in the region.
- Some refutation of Iranian efforts to support Taliban in destabilizing the region.
- US threats of not allowing the international criminal court to investigate alleged crimes in Afghanistan lay a foundation for later violence.

Grand Bargain

- Little discussion of what a Grand Bargain would look like; focus is on a ceasefire; all parties seem interested in ceasefire.
- Some need identified for finding peaceful political resolution as a result from US withdrawal from the region.
- Clear perspective that the Taliban should be brought in for discussions that include the US and the Afghan government. The coordination with and cooperation with other regional actors and warlords requires that the Afghan government and Taliban be able to establish some type of workable solution with one another.

Long Term

- Nearly nonexistent imagining of long term stability in Afghanistan. The notion of endless violence cycles and the stalemated war are the only frameworks Afghanistan is presented within; this vagueness of future peace is that the only long-term solution in Afghanistan is for the US to leave and let peace be decided somehow by the Afghans themselves.
- Ongoing Iranian ties and influence in Afghanistan somewhat desirable.

US Role

- US role is discussed in negative light: US failed leadership and US withdrawal from the region, US wants ceasefire. President Trump's new strategy for the region, claims for

want for peace in Afghanistan and lack of time table for withdraw is covered with skepticism, with emphasis placed on US inability to actualize victory and thus wanting to withdraw US influence and troops.

- US reluctance to meet with Taliban and continued hard stance toward Pakistan makes it more difficult for US to withdraw, prolongs violence. Calls for US to rethink its strategy in Afghanistan and orient forces toward establishing peace by negotiating with the Taliban with the US playing a more peripheral role.
- Some belief that new State Department consultant Khalilzad has the political capital capable of bringing dialogue between opposing parties in Afghanistan, although with an anti-Iranian bias.

Issue Narratives

- Variety of issues brought up in relation to bilateral relations with Afghanistan: Iran, India, Pakistan, US, Uzbekistan, UAE
- Focus on peace/ceasefire talks, with general support for talks show coming from multiple nations.
- Refutation of Iranian meddling in Afghanistan

National Narratives

- Signs of US weakness: US withdrawing from region; Failed US policy and leadership
- Iranian prestige, strength, and influence viewed positively: Iran influential in Afghanistan, interested in augmenting influence in the region.
- Afghanistan as held prisoner by multiple factions and international powers. Afghani government shown as often sidelined, with the real power in the country in the hands of the United States and the Taliban.

International Narratives

- Real politic: Formation of alliances and interests in Afghanistan—Iranian-Indian alliance; Pakistani interested; all countries looking at US withdrawal and augmentation of regional influence.
- International powers at odds with one another on a global stage have doomed Afghanistan in a power struggle. New workings of the members of the international system needed to secure peace.

Russian Detailed Findings

Investment in Afghanistan

- Russian proposed peace summit dominates investment mentions; summit seeking Taliban and Afghani government dialogue with participation of representatives from Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Ultimately, this summit does not take place due to US and Afghani government withdraw.
- SCO has significant interest in stabilizing Afghanistan and investing in its economy; China has a vision for an emerging multipolar world that requires functional governance of Afghan.
- US defense budget of \$5.2 billion for Afghanistan

Security Concerns in Afghanistan

- Taliban mobilization of forces and control over vast territories give impression that US will only hold portions of the country as Taliban begin to regain control and alter current status quo. Taliban offensive strikes covered at length.
- Afghani government concern over potential for US to negotiate with Taliban and the consequences to stability.
- SCO, BRICS nations, and China all concerned over instability in Afghanistan and associated terrorism disrupting potential economic growth in the region.
- Concern that the US will intentionally disrupt any attempts at peace processes brokered by actors other than itself and lead to unnecessary violence. Implied that US is the cause for lack of peace in the country.

Grand Bargain

- Taliban agreements to attempt dialogue with the US and, if need be, the Afghani government in Moscow summit and through private talks. Taliban seeking a practical political legitimacy that must be conferred by the US. Offensive strikes by Taliban an exercise of power to bring about dialogue with US.
- BRICS nations support for reconciliation in of Afghanistan as being a process driven by Afghanis themselves.
- Russian want to bring Taliban into the political process and be an accepted political group in order to accomplish lasting peace. This is considered a practical measure given the amount of territory the Taliban occupy and their ability to prevent the proliferation of more dangerous terror groups.

Long Term Afghanistan

- China wishes to bring about economic prosperity in Afghanistan through creating a stronger central Asian economic bloc. This vision calls for an Afghanistan run by Afghanis and not foreign entities.
- Long term projections see Taliban as controlling all but a handful of large urban cities and eventually commanding up to 70% of the country; equally as likely is that the Taliban end up in complete control of the country depending on their path to political legitimacy and whether or not it is brokered through dialogue or conflict

What is the role of the US

- US is shown as intentional spoiler of peace process proposed by Moscow in order to accomplish its own self-interested goals and prevent any real peaceful reconciliation that is Afghani driven to occur.
- US is unpredictable under Trump; however, it is hemorrhaging in Afghanistan and ceding control over rural areas to Taliban. US aims are to hold only a few urban cities and prop up the Afghani government in those areas (Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad).
- US is goods supplier, puppet master and protector of Afghani government and its associated forces.
- US tactics of support for various groups fracture the internal order of nations and undermine the ability of cooperative peace and unification.

Issue Narratives

- Central issue narrative is that of the Moscow summit proposal to bring Taliban and Afghanistan governments to the negotiating table with representatives from a number of interested nations. The US is blamed for ultimately undermining these peace efforts, mostly because the US does not want a settlement between Afghanistan government officials and the Taliban that it cannot dictate and control; which demonstrate "the falsity of Washington's peace-loving rhetoric towards Afghanistan."
- The Taliban offensives, though repelled, represent the strength of the Taliban in the face of a war weary US and demonstrate the ability of the Taliban to force the initiative of having the US come to the bargaining table.
- Investment concerns by the SCO, BRICS, and China over constant potential for destabilization in Afghanistan.

National Narratives

- Afghanistan- Shown in constant chaos amid a power struggle between the US and Taliban. The Afghani government is shown as a puppet with little to no legitimacy, contrasted to the Taliban who are shown as a viable political and military body capable of making direct demands to the US. Afghanistan is also shown as being unable to lead itself toward peace because of the presence and selfish desires of the United States.
- China- Shown as investor with a vision for both Afghanistan and central Asia that involves economic prosperity leading toward stability and peace. China's growing influence in the region through trading blocs and alliances, as well as the BRI are shown as rejecting foreign dominated rule and calling for the people of Afghanistan to make decisions for themselves.
- Russia- Shown as the peace-broker that the US has failed to be. The Moscow summit is presented as Russia stepping up to do what the United States has refused to do, recognize that the Taliban are the real political force in the nation and must be legitimately recognized. Practical, realist presentation of Russia, a nation interested in peace and stability for the region.
- US- Shown as having largely failed in Afghanistan but not knowing how to accept defeat to the Taliban, thus continuing policies and actions that lead to further destabilization and the potential for fractured terrorist groups, as well as plunging Afghans into constant war when peaceful options are available. Selfish, stubborn, unpredictable under Trump.

International Narratives

- The willingness to legitimize the Taliban by a non-Western coalition of nations interested in stabilizing Afghanistan and the region in order to further economic prosperity of themselves and the region.
- Alternative powers to the US in the form of the SCO, BRICS, China and Russia who offer dialogue and seek stability, in contrast to US perpetuation of war to fulfill its own interests. Seeking multi-polar world order built on compromise and cooperation.
- Failure of US spread of democracy. Such attempts have led to factionalism among nations, war, and regional destabilization to the benefit of no one native to these areas. US declining international influence, in part because it is a self-interested actor.

Chinese Detailed Findings

Investment in Afghanistan

- Investment comes primarily in the form of political capital by US, Iran, and Russia to challenge US influence and to affect the political settlement with Taliban.
- Some Chinese political and economic investment regarding One-Belt, One Road initiative; overall not designed to support Afghani government or Afghanistan stability but minor levels of Chinese influence and prestige.
- Some NATO support of military investment for security of Afghanistan.

Security Concerns in Afghanistan

- Loss of US control in securing Afghanistan: US retreating to major population centers, ceding territorial control to Taliban.
- Trump administration policies ineffective.
- Threats by ISIL in the north resulting in Taliban fighting ISIL.
- ISIL bombings attempts to derail US-Taliban negotiations.
- Iranian support of Taliban resulting in insecurity.
- Some US-Pakistan cooperation fighting terrorism in Afghanistan.

Grand Bargain

- Need for political solution which requires Taliban buy in.
- Russian, US, Taliban major players in grand bargain; Afghani government has limited to no influence or need of participation.
- US will eventually need to play more auxiliary role in Taliban-Afghani government political solution.
- General lack of detailed policy detailing major parties interests and visions for a grand bargain.

Long term Afghanistan

- Little to no discussion of future vision of Afghanistan stability or functioning Afghani state.

US Role

- US is major driver in safeguarding Afghani government with US-NATO forces holding Taliban back.
- US is major player in resolving future political resolution with Taliban.

Prominent Issue Narratives

- US-Taliban Peace talks/US Afghan policy: Failures of US policy and lack of commitment is reason for US negotiation with Taliban.
- Iranian training and support of Taliban: Iran supporting Taliban in order to challenge US influence.
- Taliban attacks: Afghanistan remains instable and threatened by Taliban forces; NATO and US withdrawing to major cities allowing for Taliban control of large swaths of the country.

- Afghanistan instability: Frequent citing of statistics detailing the lack of Afghani government control; frequent mentioning of attacks.
- Taliban fighting ISIL: Taliban drawing resources to fight ISIL in northern Afghanistan.
- Chinese-Afghan diplomatic relations: Close historical and cultural ties, but few specific plans to stabilize or meaningfully invest in stabilizing Afghani government.
- Imhran Khan: Stabilizing and reorienting Pakistani politics to positive ways in support of Chinese-Pakistan relations.
- ISIL playing spoiler to US-Taliban negotiations: attempted attacks designed to destabilize Afghanistan and appear to be from Taliban to result in breakdown of Taliban-US negotiations.

Prominent National Narratives

- US: Ineffective policies; multiple historical allusions to US policy since 2001; commentary of Trump's Afghan policy which is described as ineffective which has prompted the US to begin negotiating with the Taliban. Hypocritical: US reasons for nonparticipation in Russian led Taliban negotiations viewed as evidence of US hypocrisy—US claims that it won't negotiate with Taliban (Which is the reasons for its nonparticipation in the Russian led negotiations) is juxtaposed with its own bilateral negotiations with Taliban.
- China: Strong historical and cultural ties to Afghanistan, but no plans for tangible, specific investment or cooperation to stabilize Afghanistan Some, but limited interest in One-Belt, One-Road's inclusion of Afghanistan.
- Pakistan: Turbulent country, with at first uncertain outcome of election. However, with Imran Khan's election, a shift towards engaging China and to some extent the US; Imran Khan and his political party providing some stability of Pakistani politics and foreign interests in a positive manner.
- Russia: Increasing influence in Afghanistan. Willingness to recognize and build partnerships with Taliban.
- Iran: Rising influence and interest in Afghanistan by partnering with Taliban against US interests resulting from breakdown in US-Iranian relations.
- Afghani Government: Weak with little influence. Lack of control in large swaths of Afghanistan; unable to negotiate with Taliban due to US bilateral talks; Taliban uninterested in working with and views Afghani government as illegitimate.
- Taliban: Strong, capable, and organized. Normalized and defacto government of Afghanistan. Capable of drawing resources and fighting back against ISIL in northern Afghanistan. Proven military capability and staying power.

Prominent International Narratives

- Great Power Competition/Realism:
 - Iranian and Russian interests in Afghanistan evident and as explained as designed to limit US influence.
 - Need of recognizing Taliban as legitimate actor due to its military control and defacto governance.
 - Rearrangement of alliances: Taliban-Russian and Iranian-Taliban alliance as checking US influence.

- Realignment of Pakistani relations: Shift towards stronger Pakistani-Chinese relations over India-US relations; some warming of US-Pakistani relations, but more in lip service rather than concrete policies.
 - US source of instability in ME and Afghanistan.
 - Some NATO support of US policy in Afghanistan, but largely incapable of changing status-quo; NATO-US forces dominant factor preventing Afghani government.
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PHASE I Findings

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 interestsⁱ 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.

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*.

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