

## It will take Silky Diplomacy to build China's new road

Financial Times. June 25, 2015.

### Ahmed Rashid

Beijing has not met opposition or Islamist leaders in Asia. This must change, writes Ahmed Rashid. Today it is known as the Karakoram Highway, a twisting road carved high into the mountains along which trucks inch their way south through [China](#) and into [Pakistan](#). You can trace the origins of this dizzying pass back to the Han dynasty, when it formed part of a trading route stretching 4,000 miles. Merchants would ferry valuable Chinese silk to markets as far west as Italy, collecting ideas from the world's great cultures and depositing them as they went. Now Beijing wants to build a [new Silk Road](#) across the Eurasian landmass, equal in economic and cultural significance to that ancient precursor. Its ambition is leading it to make deals in a volatile region from which the west – in its preoccupation with east Asia – is essentially withdrawing.

Oil-rich Kazakhstan has [pledged \\$40bn](#) to revamp its railway network. Russia is among the other needy countries that Beijing hopes will build sections, possibly with Chinese loans. But it is in Afghanistan and Pakistan, two of the region's least-stable countries, that hopes are running highest.

Beijing has [invested before in Pakistan](#), to extract raw materials for its own use. Now it is involving itself in trickier bargains, which come closer to the kind of nation building that it has hitherto shunned. Deals worth \$46bn have been signed with Nawaz Sharif's government to build sections of the corridor. Afghanistan, where China wants to exploit mineral deposits and build a railway connecting Kabul to Xinjiang, has been promised \$100m in grants until 2017.

The Chinese are not offering a free lunch. Beijing wants an end to the civil war in Afghanistan, and a settlement between the government and the Afghan Taliban. It is trying to nudge Pakistan's army to end its selective support for terrorist groups, crush the Taliban in the country and bring a peaceful end to the separatist insurgency in Baluchistan province, along the route of the corridor. The Pakistan army has promised to raise a new division of 10,000 troops to protect Chinese engineers and workers – but that is not the same as ending the violence. Chinese engineers have been attacked, kidnapped and killed in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Beijing wants an end to the civil war in Afghanistan, and for Pakistan's army to end its selective support for terrorist groups.

China also wants both countries to root out hundreds of Uighur Muslim militants from Xinjiang province, who are training and fighting with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and have orchestrated attacks in Xinjiang and China itself. Beijing's line against Islamic practice was hardened this month when it banned civil servants, students and teachers from fasting during Ramadan.

To build peace, Beijing is committing diplomatic clout. Chinese officials have held at least four meetings with representatives of the Afghan Taliban – three in Beijing and the last in early June in Urumchi, capital of Xinjiang – in a bid to persuade the group to open talks with Kabul. However, in recent weeks it has increased attacks on Afghan forces, and this week took its fight to the very gates of the parliament. The extremist violence is not about to end. Such diplomacy is highly ambitious for China – it has never indulged in peace making before. Officials in the region and western experts raise serious questions about whether it has the expertise to understand the tribal, ethnic and religious quagmire in which it is embroiling itself. For decades, China has disdained to meet opposition, Islamist or insurgent leaders in Asian countries. This will have to change. Chinese companies working in Africa have angered unemployed locals by importing foreign labour. Will Beijing make the same mistake? And can it avoid complicity in the crooked practices of local politicians?

Two thousand years ago a road along this route opened civilisations to each other's ideas. China will have to navigate the region's politics skilfully if its new silk road is to open a new path to peace.

End.