

NO TROOPS TO AFGHANISTAN, SAYS CHINA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Afghanistan

On the job:China's Defence Ministry on Thursday rejected a media report that it is building a military base in Afghanistan.AP

The Chinese Defence Ministry on Thursday said it was neither setting up a military base in Afghanistan nor was it sending troops to the strife-torn country.

The Ministry, however, acknowledged that China was supporting Afghanistan to develop its defence and counterterrorism capacity. "China and the international community are all supporting Afghanistan to strengthen its defence and counterterrorism building efforts," Defence Ministry spokesperson Wu Qian said during a press conference.

On Wednesday, the *South China Morning Post* reported that the construction of a base had started, and "China will send at least one battalion of troops, along with weapons and equipment, to be stationed there and provide training to their Afghan counterparts".

Later, the daily updated its report quoting the Afghan embassy in Beijing as saying that China was helping Afghanistan set up a mountain brigade in the country's north to boost counterterrorism efforts. But it stressed that "there will be no Chinese military personnel of any kind on Afghan soil at any time".

Security cooperation

The Chinese Defence Ministry corroborated the Afghan embassy statement that it was not stationing troops in Afghanistan. "As for the so-called reports on China stationing forces in Afghanistan, this does not accord with the facts," Mr. Wu said.

However, in response to a question on China's role in training an Afghan mountain brigade, the spokesperson said China and Afghanistan had "normal military and security cooperation".

The Hindu had reported on January 10, that China would fund construction of an Afghan counterterrorism base in Badakhshan province to block cross-border infiltration of the ethnic Uighur militants. The report cited Fergana News Agency (FNA), which quoted Gen. Dawlat Waziri of the Afghan Defence Ministry, as saying that China would provide financial support to build the base, whose precise location inside Badakhshan, in northern Afghanistan, was yet to be determined.

Gen. Waziri had then said the Chinese side would cover all material and technical expenses for this base — weaponry, uniforms for soldiers, military equipment and everything else necessary for its functioning.

According to FNA, the decision to build the facility was taken during the December 2017 visit to China by Afghan Defence Minister Tariq Shah Bahrami. During his visit, Mr. Bahrami had met his former Chinese counterpart Chang Wanquan, and other senior officials. FNA said Mr. Bahrami and Gen. Chang agreed that their counterterrorism focus should not only be confined to Badakhshan, but Afghanistan's entire northern region.

Flow of militants

Afghan analysts said the largest group of Uighur militants already resides in Badakhshan, from where they can rapidly shift to China, destabilising Xinjiang province and impeding Chinese President Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative.

Earlier, Hu Shisheng, Director of the Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceanian Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, had told *The Hindu* that "those in Xinjiang who seek independence... choose the route between China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and even Pakistan to West Asia... We want to plug this flow between Xinjiang and Tajikistan and Tajikistan and Afghanistan."

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