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The Russia-China Relationship in Central Asia and Afghanistan

Both Moscow and Beijing want stability on their borders to avoid spillovers into their own territories (specifically their respective sensitive regions, the North Caucasus for Russia and Xinjiang for China), as well as to pursue their strategic and economic goals in the neighboring countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Both countries work hard to make their interests in Central Asia compatible and avoid any confrontation; they do so through an implicit division of labor, with Russia dominating the strategic space and China the economic one. There are sometimes tensions around this division—in the 2000s, Russia was worried about China capturing Turkmen gas, while in the 2010s China was unhappy with the launch of the Eurasian Economic Union and today Moscow has some concerns about China's slow emergence on the security field in Tajikistan—but on the whole the two countries have done a good job of cooperating in Central Asia. They are well aware that they both have more pressing issues to focus on, specifically relating to the West (and in particular the US).

In Afghanistan, both Russia and China are second-tier actors that lack the influence of Pakistan, Iran, or the Gulf countries. They cannot exert relevant leverage over the current negotiations with the Taliban and will have to accept the final decision being taken without them. They rely on partners that are more involved in Afghan internal affairs—Pakistan for China and, to a lesser extent, Iran for Russia—to signal their preferred outcomes.

As they do not care about the nature of the political regime in place in Kabul, they are prepared to accept a Taliban-shared or a Taliban-led government as long as 1. It does not try to spread instability—i.e., Islamist ideology—beyond Afghanistan's borders toward Central Asia or Xinjiang; and 2. It does not question the distribution of economic assets and investments secured by the current Afghan government. The first question is more sensitive for Moscow, which is concerned that Tajikistan might potentially be destabilized by a Taliban-led government; the second is on the radar of Beijing, which has been investing in several projects extracting minerals and upgrading infrastructure in Afghanistan and does not want to lose them.

But Afghanistan remains a second-tier, if not a third-tier, country in the strategic projections of both Moscow and Beijing, whose national security hinges on points of tension far from Central Asia and Afghanistan: in Ukraine for Russia and in the South China Sea for China. Both countries have shown some self-restraint in avoiding fomenting

tensions in their shared neighborhood of the Russian Far East and Central Asia. It is therefore unlikely that their modest security ambitions in Afghanistan will affect their globally positive bilateral relationship.

Unlike in the 2000s, when Moscow seemed interested in reviving its security partnership with Kabul, Russia is now more focused on securing the borders of the former Soviet Union (i.e., the Tajik-Afghan border) than on being active in Afghanistan itself. It therefore does not see China's advances into the strategic field in Afghanistan as an immediate danger. From China's perspective, a military presence in the Wakhan corridor—which Beijing currently denies having—would make sense: given the current policy of mass internment of Uyghurs, the Wakhan corridor should be protected from the Islamic State gaining a foothold in it. Except to protect its assets, however, China does not plan to be heavily involved in Afghanistan's security. It fears attacks by the Islamic State (more than by the Taliban, with which non-aggression agreements can be agreed) on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments not only in Afghanistan, but also in the Gwadar port of Pakistan and on the military base in Djibouti.

Seen from the Russian perspective, China's small military presence in Afghanistan may be annoying but not strategically threatening; protecting the Wakhan Corridor from the Islamic State would also serve Russia's interest in securing Tajikistan. Russian policy circles are closely following China's advances in Afghanistan but will not try to stop them, and consider that Beijing will have to renegotiate its security presence in the event that the Taliban regains power. China, for its part, was concerned by Moscow's sudden decision to enter into discussion with the Taliban—and, in partnership with Iran, to offer them some military support against the Islamic State—but has now become accustomed to the idea given the U.S.-led new round of negotiations with the Taliban.

Russia has historically been more critical of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan than China, in part because China's interests were represented by Pakistan, allowing Beijing to take a back seat to the confrontation, whereas Russia could not use Iran to represent its interests in Afghanistan. More recently, the realities on the ground have evolved, with Russia and Iran forging a closer relationship in the Middle East that has strengthened their cooperation over Afghanistan even as China has become uncertain how Pakistan would react in the event of a U.S.-Taliban agreement and what this would mean for the ambivalent relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban. As such, there are now more uncertainties for China than for Russia.

In the event of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is likely that Russia and China will let their partners, Iran and Pakistan, take the lead on the new configuration and adopt a wait-and-see position, observing how internal Afghan affairs evolve before positioning themselves. Russia will be more worried about the possible destabilization of the Central Asia-Afghan border, while China will be focused on the prospects for its economic assets in the country.

Russia closely follows China's inroads into Central Asia, a region it considers much more strategic for its security interests than Afghanistan. In the 2000s, Moscow expressed

concerns on several occasions, particularly around China's strategy of capturing Turkmen gas, but these have diminished in recent years as new Arctic fields have reduced Russia's need for Turkmen gas. Since the early 2010s, the Russian leadership has taken note of China's economic dominance in Central Asia and Moscow's incapacity to fight against it. The Russian response has been to build a regional integration structure—the Customs Union and then the Eurasian Economic Union—to control customs and tariff barriers while keeping Central Asian states (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) under Russia's normative umbrella. This was a successful move in the sense that it consolidated Russia's stranglehold over the Kazakhstani and Kyrgyzstani economies without requiring Russia to compete directly with China's investments in the region. When China launched the BRI, Russia responded with the notion of a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" (GEP) that would merge the Eurasian Economic Union and the BRI initiatives—an unsuccessful attempt by Russia to both imitate and control China's strategy.

Possible future coordination between China and Russia in Afghanistan will not have a decisive impact on the situation on the ground: Pakistan, Iran, and the Gulf countries (along with the US) are the only external actors that have cards to play there. Instead, China and Russia will largely adapt to what the first-tier countries decide: Moscow by following Iran's position and probably also supporting India, Beijing by continuing to back the Pakistani posture—even if the Chinese leadership also expresses concerns about Islamabad's ambiguity toward the Taliban.

China-Russia coordination in Central Asia would have more impact on the future of the region, as both countries are first-tier powers there and face limited competition from other external actors. Increased coordination between Moscow and Beijing would continue to diminish the Central Asian states' room for maneuver, particularly in the case of Kazakhstan, which is the state most interested in a balanced, multi-vectoral policy. Together, they could also engulf a reformist Uzbekistan and prevent its potential rapprochement with Western countries. At the same time, it is also possible to envision that the Russia-China relationship in Central Asia has hit a plateau and will neither grow nor diminish in the near future—instead, the two countries will carefully avoid coming into conflict with one another.

It is difficult to advance recommendations for how to protect U.S. interests in Afghanistan, as these interests are not clearly defined. U.S. policy for Afghanistan is in full swing and will depend on the nature of the agreement with the Taliban. The US will have more to negotiate with Iran, Pakistan, and the Gulf countries than with Russia and China.

In Central Asia, the situation is quite different. The US still has several instruments of leverage in Central Asia, where it continues to be seen as a guarantor of some strategic autonomy and could renew its damaged soft power by promoting better calibrated policies. Mirziyoyev's presidency in Uzbekistan has created new opportunities and the nascent post-Nazarbayev era has the potential to modify the equilibrium. A loss of trust in the US on the part of Central Asia public opinion and elites has been visible for several years and it will take time for this trust to be rebuilt. Yet many soft power initiatives and better-targeted support would be possible: Central Asians need proposals to secure the region's human

capital and its modernization in terms of know-how and managerial skills, and would welcome U.S. initiatives to this end.