

Russia-China-Afghanistan

Eugene Kogan

Moscow and Beijing are likely to discover that their initial joy over the US withdrawal from Afghanistan may be premature. Afghanistan under the Taliban remains divided, insecure and uncertain about its current and future path. Without stability and security, neither Beijing nor Moscow will provide economic assistance while the international community will continue to shun Afghanistan.

Russia's Presidential Envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, noted that "The Taliban were easier to negotiate with than the old "puppet government" of the exiled President Ashraf Ghani." The latter was seen by, and from Moscow as a puppet of the West and contacts that Russia maintained with Hamid Karzai's successor were either downgraded or revised. At the same time, contacts between Russia and the Taliban only increased. With the West's departure, Moscow is sizing up the opportunity indirectly to recognise the authority of the Taliban, which it officially designated as a terrorist organisation back in 2003 though without burning its bridges with the militant group. One should recall that in 2011, the position of the Russian Presidential Envoy to Afghanistan was created in order to facilitate meetings with the Taliban. Therefore, Russia's ambivalent position towards the Taliban would also show that Russia's diplomatic efforts to have an inclusive government in Afghanistan on the eve of the US withdrawal were effective. After all, several visits by a Taliban delegation to Moscow took place since 2018; however, the Kremlin may find that Russia's diplomatic efforts to have an inclusive government failed to materialise.

Photo: US DoD



US soldiers board a helicopter. The withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan has created a power vacuum that both Russia and China are hoping to fill.

Russia and Afghanistan: Diplomacy with Deterrence

As a result, Afghanistan's fall to the Taliban will worsen Russia's own security situation: a potential influx of Islamist extremists and terrorists to Central Asia, and therefore, to Russia cannot be excluded and this remains a longstanding

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concern for the Kremlin. It is evident that Moscow has had time to make preparations for such an outcome. As a result, it has boosted its military presence in Tajikistan where it has the 201 Military Base with an estimated 7,500 troops stationed. The base was recently reinforced with 17 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), a batch of KORNET ATGMs and it received 30 upgraded T-72B3M tanks in December. In addition, after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, a batch of 12.7 mm heavy machine guns NSV "UTES" was delivered to the base. It has also enhanced its border control capabilities, and has invested in ties with the Taliban. In addition, Russia does not face a separatist rebellion of its own Muslim republics; and the countries of Central Asia – Russia's buffer zone with Afghanistan – are functioning states, not mired in civil wars, even though occasionally they clash with each other over border problems and issues related to dis-

putes over water shortages. As an integral part of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Russia has a special responsibility for the Central Asian states' security and it is likely that Russia will further increase its role in regional security. That is precisely what Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Russian Security Council, outlined in his interview with Izvestia on 19 August 2021 when he highlighted: i) controlling migration flows from Afghanistan to Central Asia and Russia; ii) protecting Central Asia from terrorists pretending to be refugees; iii) preventing the spread of radical ideology beyond the borders of Afghanistan; and iv) protecting against arms smuggling and drug trafficking. Therefore, Russia's dual policy of maintaining unofficial ties with the Taliban and strengthening its security guarantees to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, in particular, may deter the Taliban from heating up

the borders with Russia's Central Asian partners. Still, in order to be on the safe side, Russia has also contacted the governments of Pakistan and India.

For the first time ever, Russia has approached Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan, since it realises that Pakistan can be used as an indispensable back channel to the Taliban and sees security benefits in strengthening its relationship with Pakistan. At the same time, however, Russia has also expanded its secu-

including prospective leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Tianjin, and urged the group to "make a clean break" from the terror organisations that had supported it in the past and take resolute action against the Xinjiang-based Uighur Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) in particular. Baradar pledged in return that the Taliban would not allow any organisations within the country to "engage in acts detrimental to China." Baradar's statement was further reiterated by a Chinese

tween 18 and 20 August 2021, and has been cooperating with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan on counter-terrorism since 2016. Whether or not the aforementioned cooperation may also include Russia is a good question. What is known is that Russia and Tajikistan have recently increased their own cooperation.

It was reported that a series of military exercises of the armed forces of the CSTO was held in Tajikistan in October. In addition, a special tactical exercise, 'Cobalt-2021', with special units of the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces of the CSTO took place in Tajikistan in November. As part of this exercise, tasks were developed to suppress the activities of illegal armed groups.

Therefore, cooperation between Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Russia and Tajikistan cannot be excluded.

According to open information sources, China has also built a military facility 30 km from the Tajik-Chinese border in order not to be outdone by Russia. The section where the Chinese base is located is strategically important as it overlooks one of the crucial entry points from China to Central Asia and is close to the vital Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan. The corridor is particularly important to China due to its key way station for China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). Tajikistan approved construction of a new Chinese base near the country's border with Afghanistan on 27 October 2021. The construction of a new base underlines the degree of Chinese concern towards Afghanistan and the wider region. In other words, better safe than sorry.

Although China's interests in Afghanistan are mostly economic rather than political, the aforementioned security dilemmas remain on China's agenda. It is worth remembering that Afghanistan is a resource-rich country, with many valuable resources, including gold, cobalt, copper and lithium estimated to be worth between US\$1 and US\$3 trillion, which Chinese firms could help to extract. The country is also a convenient destination for Beijing's BRI which seeks to expand China's commercial links with Asia, Africa and Europe. As the Taliban have largely been shunned by the West, Chinese investment and trade is a lucrative proposition.

Still, as long as the Taliban do not control all Islamist groups in Afghanistan, Chinese investments are fraught with major security risks; therefore, Beijing is likely to pursue a cautious policy. It also remains to be seen whether or not the Taliban-led government will be able to organise



Photo: CC BY 2.0

The Taliban have been in control of Afghanistan for six months. But hardly anyone trusts them to be able to effectively administer the country ravaged by civil war.

city cooperation with India against shared threats emanating from Afghanistan. Russia's Ambassador to India, Nikolay Kudashev, acknowledged on 6 September 2021 that "Moscow and New Delhi are both concerned by a spill-over of terrorism from Afghanistan, as it poses a threat to Central Asia and Kashmir."

In the coming months, Russia is likely to combine diplomacy with deterrence, as it seeks to mitigate security threats and capitalise on nascent commercial opportunities in Afghanistan. As for the latter, China is likely to win a larger share than Russia since China can provide substantial financial incentives that Russia is lacking.

China and Afghanistan: First Security, then the Carrot

It should be stressed, however, that Russia is not alone in its efforts to indirectly recognise the authority of the Taliban. For instance, China established contact with the Taliban long ago, and its diplomats continue to work in the country, including in the cities that came under Taliban control before Kabul fell.

In July 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, met with a Taliban delegation,

Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman and the Director of the Foreign Ministry Information Department, Hua Chunying. She stated on 16 August 2021 that, "The Taliban has repeatedly said that they want to develop a good relationship with China and hope that Beijing will take part in the reconstruction and development of the nation. The group has also said it will never allow any forces to use the country to harm China."

Although Russia and China may have bet on the Taliban coming to power, their current confidence in the Islamic militant group may well be short-lived. No inclusive government that the Taliban promised is likely to appear, while drug trafficking and religious extremism will be allowed and will only spread.

As a result, due to the inaccessible areas on the border with both Afghanistan and China, Tajikistan is considered a country that offers terrorist groups a particularly good opportunity to infiltrate into China's autonomous region of Xinjiang. Moreover, Xinjiang remains China's soft belly and a key concern for Beijing. As a result, China is now conducting joint anti-terrorism exercises with Tajikistan, the most recent of which took place be-



Photo: Kremlin.ru

In June 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping welcomes Russian President Putin on an official visit to China. Afghanistan was one of the topics the two leaders discussed.

the extraction of the country's natural resources. China might have to invest not only in mines, but also in the necessary infrastructure. And at this juncture, Chinese will think twice before making an investment. Another dilemma for China is likely to be the cultivation of poppies (for opium) which was, and still is the Taliban's largest single source of income. It would be difficult for any partner in a Taliban government to convince them to forego this lucrative source of income. For instance, opium production generated around US\$2Bn in income in 2020. The UN Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) has calculated that the opium business will have generated between US\$1.8Bn and US\$2.7Bn in Afghanistan in 2021. An alternative business that can generate substantial income needs to be offered to the Taliban-led government. Extraction of natural resources can be one of them but it is time-consuming and requires enforced peace and quiet in the country for the foreseeable future.

While the Chinese will be happy to offer the promise of major investments, and even provide some short-term assistance to the new government, any serious economic presence in Afghanistan will be contingent on a political and security environment in which Beijing has confidence. Whether or not the Taliban-led government can provide iron-clad guarantees for maintaining such an environment remains to be seen.

Russia cannot offer Afghanistan major investments - unlike China, which promises extraction of Afghanistan's valuable mineral resources, building necessary infrastructure or investing in construction and transportation business. After all, Afghanistan's basic infrastructure has been destroyed over the last 40 years. Almost 90 per cent of all road construction projects in Afghanistan are facing a lack of funds since these were previously provided by the international community. In addition, the current extreme instability in Afghanistan also deters some Russian investors but may attract the attention of some others such as Evgeny Prigozhin (associated with the Private Military Contractor (PMC) Wagner or Wagner Group) and Gennady Timchenko, the owner of the private investment group, Volga Group. Whether or not China may offer a piece of pie to Russia remains to be seen. Nevertheless, Russia still supports the removal of asset freezes worth up to US\$9.5Bn against the Taliban and has urged the international community to assist in Afghanistan's reconstruction after four decades of conflict. However, much depends on the internal situation in Afghanistan. Currently, the international community is not heeding Russia's request. Still, even limited cooperation between all relevant members of the international community could lead to a gradual improvement in the situation in Afghanistan.

Outlook

Russian and Chinese interests in Afghanistan are primarily focused on the security situation in the country and the neighbouring region of Central Asia. That is where Russian and Chinese interests converge. The two countries are wary of political involvement in Afghanistan since such involvement can lead to incalculable and long-term damage but they will defend their security interests by all means. The increase in the number of CSTO exercises in Tajikistan underline the notion that Russia and China are taking security matters seriously.

Regarding economic interests, China is the one with all the tools, however, as long as the domestic situation in Afghanistan remains uncertain and insecure, Chinese investments will not flow into Afghanistan and the current situation and future of Afghanistan will remain precarious.

Whether or not Russian businessmen, for example, the aforementioned Prigozhin and Timchenko can utilise and apply their experience of working in the grey zones; namely, in those states whose regimes are under sanctions, or do not fully control the situation in the country remains to be seen.

It appears that the Taliban government is sticking to its own policies and, as a result, it leaves Russian and Chinese governments in an untenable situation. ■