

The Taliban Takeover and China-Russia Relations

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan could serve as an important test for relations between China and Russia. The emerging situation could stimulate increased bilateral cooperation, including in regional security affairs, but it could also create challenges for the relationship. The outcome will affect the dynamics of China-Russia relations in both Central Asia and South Asia.

By Brian G. Carlson

For both China and Russia, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan presents opportunities as well as risks. In recognition of the Taliban's continued strength, both countries cultivated ties with the movement in recent years and might now recognize it as the legitimate government, hoping thereby to safeguard their own interests. Both China and Russia view the US withdrawal and the Taliban takeover as an opportunity to weaken US prestige around the world, remove any possibility of a long-term US military presence in the heart of Eurasia, and bolster their own regional influence. At the same time, both countries are highly attentive to the risks of renewed instability and resurgent terrorism in the region. Despite the opportunities that now beckon, Taliban rule in Afghanistan could ultimately prove to be a liability for both countries.

These similar outlooks present opportunities for cooperation and a further strengthening of the China-Russia relationship. As a new regional order takes shape following the US withdrawal, however, latent sources of tension that the two countries have so far managed relatively smoothly could come to the surface and create new challenges. Afghanistan's location at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia ensures that its future will affect the dynamics of China-Russia relations in both regions. Efforts to address potential fault lines,



Russian President Vladimir Putin takes part in a video conference call with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Kremlin in Moscow in June 2021. *Alexei Nikolsky / Kremlin*

many of which result from China's growing regional influence, could be an important test for the relationship.

China's Interests

China now has an opportunity to strengthen its influence in Afghanistan and the broader region. Its first priority, which is a prerequisite for all else, is to limit regional instability and counter security threats to its own western regions. In particular, China aims to prevent Afghanistan from be-

coming a base of support for resistance by the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities to China's rule in Xinjiang. Despite worldwide outrage at China's treatment of the Muslim populations of Xinjiang, China received positive signals on this issue in late July, when it hosted a high-level Taliban delegation. According to an account of the meeting by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Taliban promised that it would "never allow any force to use the Afghan territory to engage in acts detrimental

to China.” Earlier in July, a Taliban spokesman promised to refrain from interference in China’s “internal affairs.” China never recognized the Taliban during its earlier period of rule, from 1996 to 2001, but it might do so now while offering economic incentives in order to gain the movement’s cooperation. Like Russia, China initiated diplomatic outreach to the Taliban years before its recent takeover, hosting a previous delegation in 2019.

Beyond efforts to ensure the security of its own western regions, China has an opportunity to pursue economic interests in Afghanistan. A consortium of Chinese companies acquired a concession at the Mes Aynak copper mine in 2008, though mining has yet to begin. Afghanistan may hold nearly 1 trillion USD of mineral deposits, including rare earth minerals. China could also link Afghanistan with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For example, it could build a highway from Peshawar to Kabul that would connect Afghanistan with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China is already building a major road through the Wakhan Corridor that will connect Xinjiang with Pakistan and Central Asia. China could even seek a connection with Iran and Southwest Asia through Afghanistan. The Taliban has signaled its openness to Chinese infrastructure investments.

Such investments rely on a secure environment in Afghanistan, however, a prospect that remains uncertain at best. In July, a terrorist attack in Pakistan killed nine Chinese citizens, underscoring the risks that

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China faces. In seeking to protect its interests abroad, China has been reluctant to use military force beyond its own borders. It might be especially apprehensive about heavy security involvement in Afghanistan, the legendary “graveyard of empires.” Securing its own borders is a necessity, but establishing a large security presence to protect investments abroad is a more sensitive issue. In the end, security concerns could prevent or sharply curtail Chinese investments in Afghanistan.

Russia’s Interests

Russia’s aims focus squarely on security. The primary objective is to secure Afghanistan’s northern borders with Tajikistan, Uzbeki-



stan, and Turkmenistan. This is necessary in order to defend Russia’s own southern border against sources of instability, including Islamic State activities, other extremism and terrorism, and drug trafficking. Russia maintains the Kant Air Base near Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and the 201st Military Base in and around Dushanbe, Tajikistan. The latter is a set of facilities that hosts 7,000 Russian troops, making it Russia’s largest foreign military base. In August, as the Taliban gained territory in northern Afghanistan, Russia held joint military exercises with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

on Tajik territory, about 20 kilometers from the Afghan border, signaling the three countries’ determination to maintain regional security. Russia seeks to use the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a six-member grouping that includes Tajikistan but excludes Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, to establish itself as the region’s main security provider.

This desire does not extend to Afghanistan’s own territory, however. Russia has bitter memories of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, which ended in humiliating retreat. Russia has neither the desire to become involved in internal Afghan security, nor any interests

that would require this. In recent years, Russia began engaging with the Taliban diplomatically, eventually hosting a parallel peace process that included Taliban representatives, even though the movement remains banned on Russian territory. Russia now hopes that a strong relationship with the Taliban will protect its interests. Unlike China, Russia lacks the financial resources for major investments in Afghanistan or the broader region. Moreover, given China’s longstanding influence over Pakistan and its potential new influence over the Taliban, Russia’s regional policies might depend heavily on cooperation with China.

Prospects for Cooperation

Grounds for such cooperation exist. On the level of political rhetoric, both China and Russia have seized upon recent events in an effort to discredit the United States. As the Taliban drew near to victory and then achieved it, both countries criticized the United States for its failures in Afghanistan over the previous 20 years, including its chaotic withdrawal. This record, they argued, undermined US professions of commitment to allies and claims to global leadership. Although China and Russia recognized the US intervention’s contribution to regional stability and counterterrorism, both countries sought to prevent an

open-ended US military presence in the region. They largely achieved this objective years ago, following the closures of US bases in Uzbekistan in 2005 and Kyrgyzstan in 2014. During their June 16 summit in Geneva, Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly told US President Joe Biden that Russia opposed the establishment of US military bases in Central Asia and that China would object as well. Putin reportedly offered to allow the stationing of US forces at Russian bases in the region, but it remains unclear whether this offer was genuine.

Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the prospect of renewed regional instability could encourage cooperation between China and Russia. In August, as the Taliban victory approached, Russian forces participated for the first time in domestic Chinese military exercises (Joint Western-2021). These exercises, which took place in Ningxia Province, focused on counterterrorism. In September, Russia and China conducted joint military exercises (Peace Mission 2021) on Russian territory, near the border with Kazakhstan, under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These exercises also featured counterterrorist drills. Russia and China have held joint military exercises in the SCO format since 2005, many of which have focused on counterterrorism. In the event of regional instability, possibly including terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan, China and Russia might draw upon this experience to mount a joint military intervention in Central Asia.

China and Russia could also seek to coordinate their efforts through the SCO, which maintains its original aim of combating the “three evils” of separatism, extremism, and terrorism. In September, SCO leaders held a hybrid summit in Dushanbe, where they made headlines by approving Iran’s application for full membership. The summit declaration called for stability in Afghanistan and the formation of a government representing all ethnic, religious, and political groups in the country. Developing a common approach toward Afghanistan will be a challenge for the SCO, however, especially following the accession to full membership of rivals India and Pakistan in 2017. Member states’ approaches to regional issues and their relations with each other remain primarily bilateral.

Influence in Central Asia

Despite such opportunities for China–Russia cooperation, latent tensions related to both Central Asia and South Asia could

emerge. China and Russia have grown steadily closer throughout the post-Cold War era, but Central Asia has always loomed as a potential source of tension. Russia seeks to be the dominant regional actor, but China’s steadily growing influence threatens Russia’s status. To date, the two countries have managed this situation relatively well. In 2015, they agreed to link the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union with the Silk Road Economic Belt, the continental component of the BRI. China has sought to reassure Russia and the Central Asian states that its aims are economic development and connectivity rather than political control over the region. According to one common view, China and Russia have a tacit bargain in the region stipulating a division of labor in which Russia remains the main external security provider while China is the engine for economic development.

This argument was never entirely convincing, however. As its economic interests in the region grew, China was always likely to acquire political influence and reasons to

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expand its security role. As early as 2016, China began working with Pakistan, Tajikistan, and the previous government of Afghanistan to ensure regional security. Chinese think tank experts reportedly engaged with their Russian counterparts in order to explain China’s intentions for this format. China has long sought to ensure security along its 91-kilometer border with Afghanistan at the eastern end of the Wakhan Corridor, as well as along its 477-kilometer border with Tajikistan, a potential transit country for extremists or terrorists entering from Afghanistan. In recent years, China helped to build and fortify Tajikistan’s border posts with Afghanistan, strengthened the capabilities of Pakistan’s security forces, and built a base for Afghan mountain forces in Badakhshan, near the Wakhan Corridor. China also built a People’s Armed Police (PAP) base in Tajikistan and reportedly established a base in Afghanistan as well, though China never confirmed this.

These activities had the potential to create tension with Russia. However, China’s security engagement with Pakistan and Tajikistan, and now with the Taliban, proba-

bly reflects no intention to sideline Russia as a regional security actor. Rather, China’s purpose is to ensure security in the sector of most direct concern to itself, namely its western border region. Instead of a division of labor between economics and security, China and Russia could work out a division of labor within the security realm itself, with each country focusing on particular sectors. Under such an arrangement, Russia would accept China’s efforts to secure its own border by cooperating with neighboring countries. In the long term, however, China could expand its regional security presence in a way that would diminish Russia’s role. How Russia would view a significant Chinese security presence in the region aiming to protect far-flung investments, not just its own border, remains an open question.

Diplomatic Rigidity in South Asia

Recent developments also create possible tension in the context of South Asia. For years, Russia has sought to strengthen the Russia–India–China (RIC) triangle, both to develop a counterweight to the West and to rely on India for subtle balance against China. These efforts have never lived up to their lofty aspirations, and they have come under increased strain amid growing China–India tensions. This puts Russia in an awkward position. Russia seeks to maintain close ties with India, but it has criticized India’s participation in the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quad, a security grouping that also includes the United States, Japan, and Australia.

The Taliban’s victory in Afghanistan could exacerbate these tensions. India was a firm supporter of the previous government in Afghanistan. It opposed Russia’s efforts to cultivate the Taliban in recent years, as well as its related outreach to Pakistan. Indian officials are now concerned that China will work with its “all-weather” ally, Pakistan, to strengthen its influence over Afghanistan at India’s expense. Attempts by China to link Afghanistan with the BRI and CPEC, initiatives that India opposes, could heighten India’s concerns. Moreover, in light of Pakistan’s close connections to the Taliban, China’s influence over Pakistan, and China’s likely desire to use Pakistan to exert control over the Taliban, Russia might need to coordinate its regional policies closely with all three actors. These trends could encourage Russia’s drift into an informal grouping with China, Pakistan, and Iran in opposition to the Quad. Notably,

diplomats from these four countries met on the sidelines of the Dushanbe summit in a so-called PIRC grouping, primarily to discuss Afghanistan.

A Test for China-Russia Relations

Such an outcome would not be optimal from Russia's standpoint. Russia would prefer to conduct an independent foreign policy, playing the dominant role in Central Asia while maintaining close relations with India. For now, however, Russia places

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priority on relations with China, complicating its efforts to achieve these other objectives. This problem could grow following the Taliban takeover and eventually strain the China-Russia relationship. In the near term, however, both countries remain committed to their partnership, suggesting a shared desire to manage these and other possible sources of tension.

For the West, this raises the specter of shared Chinese and Russian domination over Central Asia, an outcome that Western policymakers and strategists have sought to avoid. The administration of former US President George W. Bush launched the Greater Central Asia strategy, which aimed to stabilize Afghanistan and thereby allow the Central Asian states to expand economic links to South Asia. Such an outcome would have provided the landlocked Central Asian states with valuable economic and strategic options, thereby reducing their vulnerability to pressure from Russia and China. This vision never received sufficient political support and financial investment to succeed, and it is now further from reality than at any time since 2001. The Central Asian states seek to maintain independence in their foreign policies, but they could now find themselves increasingly dependent on Russia and China.

Growing diplomatic rigidity in South Asia could also frustrate Western efforts to pull

Russia away from China. Hopes for such a gambit rest in part on the strength of Russia's desire to maintain diplomatic flexibility by strengthening relations with some of China's rivals, including India, Japan, and Vietnam, rather than casting its lot entirely with China. The Taliban takeover, however, further complicates Russia's relations with India. In the long term, Russia could eventually conclude that close relations with China were creating excessive dependence, unduly restricting its foreign policy options, and forcing unwelcome concessions in regions such as Central Asia. In the near term, however, such a reversal seems unlikely.

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