

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Russian-Chinese cooperation and competition in Afghanistan and its implications for Central Asia

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore current and perspective trends of relations between Russia and China in Afghanistan and Central Asia. It also analyzes whether the withdrawal of the U.S. and the subsequent Taliban takeover helped—and continues to help—strengthen the two powers' positions in the region and what kind of challenges and benefits they face. The paper examines the hypothesis that the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power added to Russia and China's benefits in the region. The research uses content analysis regarding official documents, political and military elite speeches, interviews, and reports to explain Russia and China's official positions and policies regarding Afghanistan and Central Asia. Relations between the two powers as regards Afghanistan and Central Asia are comparatively analyzed. The paper uses the neorealist approach, which is fit for explaining relations between Russia and China in Afghanistan and Central Asia. After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, regional security is now the business of the regional powers, mainly China and Russia. Now they should bear the responsibilities and share the burdens. There is probably more ground for competition after eliminating the threats in Afghanistan and especially in Central Asia for Moscow and Beijing. However, Russia and China will continue to try to align their interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia, especially if their relations with U.S. remain at the current level or worsen in the coming years. Based on the findings, this paper argues that, on the one hand, Russia and China continue to try to take advantage of the instability in the region by stepping up their security and economic influences in Central Asia. However, their stabilizing efforts in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the U.S., ironically may increase competition between China and Russia.

Keywords

Russia, China, Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Taliban

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Introduction

In August 2021, Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said that developments in Afghanistan with the return of the Taliban to power would change the geopolitical balance of power in the region. He expressed concern that the influence of China and Russia would increase in the country.¹ In response, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grushko said that the words of Borrell regarding the plans of the EU to prevent the spread of the influence of Russia and China on Afghanistan are surprising and added “let them try to challenge us”.²

This paper aims to explore a research problem: current and perspective trends of relations between Russia and China in Afghanistan and Central Asia. In order to explain the development of relations between the two powers, their current state and to identify possible perspectives, this paper covers the period of relations between Russia and China in Afghanistan and Central Asia starting from 2001—when the USA entered Afghanistan.

The paper identifies a research question grounded in Russia’s and China’s Afghan policies and the developments after the Taliban takeover: How could cooperation or competition increase between Russia and China in Afghanistan and the region? The article also aims to respond to two additional questions in order to examine the problem in more detail: Why do Russia and China cooperate on security in Afghanistan and Central Asia?; Did the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban victory help to strengthen Russia’s and China’s positions in the region?

The paper aims to examine the hypothesis that the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban’s return to power added to Russia and China’s benefits in the region.

This paper also explores perspectives of cooperation between Russia and China on Afghanistan and its regional and global implications. Since Afghanistan borders the Central Asian states and, in recent years is even considered part of that region, most importantly—for both Moscow and Beijing—the relations with the Central Asian states are of utmost interest in the region, the paper analyzes the influences of the two powers’ cooperation in Afghanistan on Central Asia. Based on the findings of that analysis, this paper argues that, on the one hand, Russia and China continue to take advantage of the instability in the region by stepping up their security and economic influences in Central Asia. Their stabilizing efforts

¹ “Joint AFET - DEVE Committee meeting with the Delegation for relations with Afghanistan,” *Multimedia Center-European Parliament*, August 19, 2021, https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/joint-afet-deve-committee-meeting-with-delegation-for-relations-with-afganisthan_20210819-0900-COMMITTEE-AFET-DEVE_vd.

² “The Foreign Ministry was surprised by Borrell’s words about the inadmissibility of the influence of the Russian Federation and China on Afghanistan,” *Interfax*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/785274>.

in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the U.S., ironically may increase competition between China and Russia in the region.

The main reason for choosing the topic is the importance of Russian-Chinese relations for contemporary international relations and international security. Most importantly, there are few published academic works on the reality and perspectives of relations between the two great powers in Afghanistan, and its influences on the adjacent region, Central Asia, following the Taliban's return to power.

Methods

In methodological terms, the paper employs qualitative methods. The research uses content analysis regarding official documents, political and military elite speeches, interviews, and reports to explain Russia and China's official positions and policies regarding Afghanistan and Central Asia. In order to explore understanding and approaches of Russian and Chinese political elite on Afghanistan and the region, content analysis was chosen to be included as part of the paper's methods. In this respect, thoughts and approaches of the high decision makers in their speeches, statements, interviews and articles were analyzed. Relations between the two powers as regards Afghanistan and Central Asia are comparatively analyzed. The paper uses the neorealist approach, which is fit for explaining relations between Russia and China in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Primary and secondary sources are used to analyze developments before and after the Taliban returned to power. Interviews and reports from Russian, Chinese, and Western media are used when describing developments prior to and following the aftermath of the Taliban takeover. Because of the paper's focus on recent developments there are few published academic works dealing with Russian-Chinese cooperation in Afghanistan or the adjacent region after the Taliban returned to power. The paper also uses official information, reports, and interviews. As primary sources statements, speeches and interviews of the decision makers are used, discussions on the problem were held with several experts from the region. In order to explore past and ongoing developments on the problem of the paper articles and books were gathered and analyzed as secondary sources.

Russian and Chinese priorities in Afghanistan

The goals of Russia and China regarding developments in Afghanistan on many issues are coupled. Since 2001, their main goals have been to stabilize Afghanistan and see the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO military bases. This second goal, as with any great power, is principally concerned with the balance of power especially along their respective borders. Considering the distribution of military assets among the great powers in the international system and that there are no status quo powers in the system, for the occasional hegemon that wants to maintain its dominating position over potential rivals, it is difficult if not impossible to secure constantly eternal cooperative relations with them. Therefore, great powers are rarely content with the current distribution of power; on the contrary they face a constant incentive

to change it in their favor.³ However, although neither wanted permanent U.S. military bases, because of fears surrounding U.S. power projection in Central Asia, they are worried about uncertainties following a withdrawal.

The evolution of Russia's Afghan policy changed from being a marginal post-Soviet player into a major diplomatic actor on Afghanistan and a supporter of a negotiated settlement involving the Taliban between 1990s and 2010s.⁴ Russia's main goal in conducting parallel formats to the United States was to exert influence over the internal and external negotiations on Afghanistan, and this happened amidst increasing contradictions between Russia and U.S. Since the 2010s Moscow has been seeking to gain a leading role in the negotiations on Afghanistan and to promote Russia's interests.

Russia's interests in Afghanistan center on ensuring security and preventing the destabilization of the Afghan-Central Asian border area. Three of these Central Asian countries—Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan—are Russian allies within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union.

The additional goal is to keep Afghanistan as a neutral state which cannot be used as launching pad against Russia. Afghanistan's geographic location, already considered by China, India, Iran and Pakistan as site for several transport and energy projects, attracts Russia as it seeks to play a major role in Eurasia. Although Russia's current economic participation is weak, it does try to ensure its economic interests in Afghanistan for when a peace resolution is achieved.⁵ However, Russia and Afghanistan have economic cooperation experiences.⁶ Eliminating drug traffic from Afghanistan is one of Russia's primary means for reducing their own domestic drug use.⁷ However, the World Drug Report does show a decline in trafficking of opiates from Afghanistan along the northern route through Central Asia to Russia already in 2019.⁸

³ J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), https://books.google.co.in/books/about/The_Tragedy_of_Great_Power_Politics.html?id=jOV9HuCpqqwC&redir_esc=y.

⁴ E. Stepanov, "Russia and the Search for a Negotiated Solution in Afghanistan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 73, no. 5 (2021): 928–952.

⁵ A. Naderi, "Возвращение России в Афганистан: перспективы двустороннего экономического сотрудничества," [Vozvrashcheniye Rossii v Afganistan: perspektivy dvustoronnego ekonomicheskogo sotrudnichestva], *Vestnik RUDN-International Relations* 17, no. 4 (2017): 781–792.

⁶ V. Korgun ed., *Афганистан в начале XXI века* [Afganistan v nachale xxi veka] (Moscow: Institut izucheniya Izrailiya i Blizhnego Vostoka. Moscow: Институт изучения Израиля и Ближнего Востока) (Moskva: Institut izucheniya Izrailiya i Blizhnego Vostoka, 2004), 115–125.

⁷ A. Kulagin, "Afganskiy narkotrafik - угрозы dlya Rossii i Evropy," [Афганский наркотрафик - угрозы для России и Европы], *Nauchnyy Zhurnal* 7, no. 8 (2016), <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/afganskiy-narkotrafik-ugrozy-dlya-rossii-i-evropy>.

⁸ UNODC, "The World Drug Report 2019," 2019, https://wdr.unodc.org/wdr2019/prelaunch/WDR2019_B1_R.pdf.

It should be noted that although a stable Afghanistan would align with Russia's interests, Moscow does not have vital economic interests in the country.⁹

China officially highlighted their three most pressing Afghan priorities: first, avoid further expansion of the conflict in Afghanistan particularly, an all-out civil war. Second, restart intra-Afghan negotiations as soon as possible to achieve political reconciliation. Third, prevent terrorist forces from taking advantage of the situation to further develop and therefore prevent Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist gathering ground.¹⁰

Beijing has economic interests in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on its vast mineral wealth.¹¹ While China wants to have access to natural resources and extend its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),¹² the difficult security conditions mean those remain long-term goals with uncertainty over fulfillment of those projects in the region.¹³ Uncertainties caused by Afghanistan's security situation will probably increase following the Taliban's regaining power.

China shares a roughly 80-kilometer border with Afghanistan, and Beijing's main interest now is to keep the conflict from spilling beyond Afghanistan's borders. Central to those worries is how to curb regional instability and eliminate the potential for Afghanistan to become a haven for terrorist groups, mainly Uyghur militants.¹⁴ The highest of all priorities is securing the Taliban's facilitation and support on Xinjiang-related issues, and to do this, Beijing must guarantee the Taliban leadership regional and domestic stability.¹⁵

⁹ D. Trenin *et al.*, "Афганистан после вывода войск международной коалиции: угрозы, риски и вызовы для Российской Федерации," [Afghanistan posle vyvoda voysk mezhdunarodnoy koalitsii: ugrozy, riski i vyzovy dlya Rossiyskoy Federatsii] (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Carnegie Moscow Center, 2014), 8, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Afghanistan_web_Rus2014.pdf.

¹⁰ Y. Wang, "Expounds China's Latest Position on the Situation in Afghanistan," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 14, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1891909.shtml.

¹¹ M. Stanley and E. Mikhaylova, "Mineral Resource Tenders and Mining Infrastructure Projects Guiding Principles - Case Study: The Aynak Copper Deposit, Afghanistan," The World Bank, Extractive Industries for Development Series No. 22, September, 2011, 40–42, <https://www.abc.net.au/cm/lb/3732702/data/aynak-copper-data.pdf>.

¹² N. Martin, "Afghanistan: Taliban to reap \$1 trillion mineral wealth. Deutsche Welle," August 18, 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-taliban-to-reap-1-trillion-mineral-wealth/a-58888765?utm_source=pocket_mylist.

¹³ R. Pantucci, "The myth of Chinese investment in Afghanistan," *Nikkei Asia*, August 16, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/The-myth-of-Chinese-investment-in-Afghanistan2>.

¹⁴ R. Standish, "Explainer: What Does China Want From Afghanistan After The Taliban Takeover?," RFERL, August 20, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-china-goals/31420549.html>.

¹⁵ N. Yau, "China Takes Full Advantage of Taliban's Isolation," July 6, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/china-takes-full-advantage-of-talibans-isolation/>.

Chinese-Russian diplomatic cooperation in the Afghan peace settlement

One of the diplomatic formats on the Afghan peace settlements with the participation of Moscow is a joint initiative, the China-Russia-U.S. that grew out of the U.S.-Russian dialogue on Afghanistan,¹⁶ which in the summer of 2019 expanded with the participation of Pakistan.¹⁷ Moscow and Beijing also use some other diplomatic initiatives, such as the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group.¹⁸ The Moscow format as a platform for consultations at the Eurasian level started in December 2016 in the form of trilateral consultations between Russia, China, and Pakistan.¹⁹ On 14 April 2017, the third round was held, and the formally referred to “consultations” were upgraded to the “Moscow conference on the Afghan settlement”. According to the Russian scholar Ekaterina Stepanova, Russia pursues two interrelated strategies regarding negotiations over the settlement of the Afghan conflict.²⁰ The first strategy is the regionalization of Russian policy on Afghanistan aimed at intensifying dialogue, coordination, and interaction with the main regional powers (Iran, China, India and Pakistan). Stepanova argues that the regionalization of Russia’s Afghan policy started long before 2014 and was a reaction to significant shifts at the regional level, including the growing role of the four countries in regional politics and security and their expanding influence on the situation in Afghanistan. She notes that the decreasing presence of the United States and NATO by the mid-2010s and the gradual decline of Western influence in the region only contributed to the further strengthening of the regionalization of Russian politics. The second strategy is Russia’s turn towards more active diplomatic support for a negotiated Afghan settlement. The Russian foreign policy leadership gradually came to the understanding that none of the challenges to the security of Russia and its allies that were emanating from Afghanistan could be dealt with so long as “the armed confrontation between Kabul / US / NATO and the Taliban, continued and escalated”.²¹

¹⁶ “Trilateral Consensus of Russia, China and the United States on the Peace Process in Afghanistan,” *Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Tajikistan*, April 25, 2019, https://dushanbe.mid.ru/novosti-posolstva/-/asset_publisher/tKTrZaRYxl/content/trehstoronnij-konsensus-rossii-kitaa-i-ssa-po-mirnomu-processu-afganistane?inheritRedirect=true.

¹⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Joint Statement by Russia, China, USA and Pakistan on the Afghan Peace Process,” October 28, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3867739.

¹⁸ K. Warikoo, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Afghanistan,” April 26, 2019, <http://infoshos.ru/en/?idn=21303#:~:text=The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group,through political consultations and dialogue>.

¹⁹ E. Stepanova, “Russia’s Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Contexts,” *Russie.Nei.Reports*, no. 23, *Ifri*, May, 2018, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/russieneireports/russias-afghan-policy-regional-and-russia-west>.

²⁰ E. Stepanova, “Мирный процесс по Афганистану и роль России,” [Mirnyy protsess po Afganistanu i rol’ Rossii], *Puti k miru i bezopasnosti* 2, no. 57 (2019): 21–33.

²¹ Stepanova, “Мирный процесс по Афганистану,” 27.

This undermined the functionality of the Afghan state and its control over its territory. She stresses that coming to an understanding of this reality became the main impetus in the shift in Moscow's policy towards favoring active diplomatic efforts for a peaceful solution to the Afghan problem.²² The combination of these two strategies has found its practical embodiment in the form of the Moscow format of regional peace consultations on Afghanistan.

Chinese-Russian security cooperation in the region

Central to cooperation on security is how to curb regional instability, and the main issue is the security of the Central Asian states. Besides the geographical proximity, Afghanistan culturally, religiously, ethnically, and in some cases linguistically, is closely related to the Central Asian states. In this respect, Central Asia has played an essential role in the cooperation between Russia and China in Afghanistan since the 2010s. Therefore, studies on the current state and prospects for the two powers' relations in Afghanistan cannot be considered without first considering Moscow and Beijing's interests and activities in Central Asia.

While Russia has been the leading power in Central Asia since the 20th century, in recent years China has been increasing its economic presence and security involvement in the region. Russia has been involved in Chinese-Central Asia military cooperation since its inception. In 1996 the agreement between Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and China on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area was signed.²³ Since the 2010s China has been conducting serial joint **anti-terrorism military exercises with Central Asian nations**, such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Tajikistan is one of the critical points in Beijing's national security issues related to the Belt and Road Initiative in the region. Notwithstanding Moscow's suspicions over China's activities in former Soviet republics, **Russia might have agreed to Beijing's military cooperation** with them to fight or prevent the infiltration of radical groups into Central Asia, which also poses a threat to Russia. Given its economic shortcomings, Moscow probably decided to share the burden of military presence with Beijing; protecting the southern borders of the Central Asian countries from possible threats and infiltration by radical groups is clearly in **the common interests of Russia, China, and the countries** of the region.

In 2021 Tajikistan and China conducted joint anti-terror drills, and the Central Asian countries and Russia held several military drills in connection with the situation in Afghanistan.²⁴ In August 2021, the delegation of the Chinese Central

²² Stepanova, 28.

²³ "Agreement between Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area," *United Nations Peacemaker*, May 17, 1996, <https://peacemaker.un.org/regional-confidencebuildingborders96>.

²⁴ "The latest modern weapons used in joint Tajik-Chinese tactical exercises," *Khovar*, August 19, 2021, <https://khovar.tj/rus/2021/08/novejshee-sovremennoe-oruzhie-primeneno-na-sovmestnyh-tadzhiksko-kitajskih-takticheskikh-uchenyah/>.

Military Commission (CMC) Equipment Development Department visited Uzbekistan²⁵ to discuss new cooperation projects in the field of weapons and military technology.²⁶

Russia also increased its military cooperation with the regional states in 2021 and held several exercises. In April, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu toured the region, and attended a meeting of the Council of Defense Ministers of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states.²⁷ In Dushanbe, Russian and Tajik ministers announced the creation of a unified air defense system between Russia and Tajikistan.²⁸ During Shoigu's visit to Tashkent, the strategic partnership program between Russia and Uzbekistan in the military field for 2021–2025 was unveiled.²⁹

During the meeting of the defense ministers of the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Dushanbe in July 2021, directions and possible activities to neutralize the risks and threats emanating from the territory of Afghanistan were discussed.³⁰

Joint exercises of Russia, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan were held in August 2021.³¹ Russia and Uzbekistan attended the joint tactical exercise “South-2021”.³² Moreover, the joint exercises of the Collective Forces of Rapid Deployment of the Central Asian Collective Security Region of the CSTO “Rubezh-2021” were held from 7–9 September at the Edelweiss training ground in Kyrgyzstan.³³

²⁵ “O‘zbekiston-Xitoy: harbiy-texnikaviy hamkorlikni takomillashtirish yo‘lida,” *Oboronprom RUz/Mudofaa sanoati*, August 19, 2021, <https://t.me/oboronpromuz/215>.

²⁶ “O‘zbekiston-Xitoy: harbiy-texnikaviy hamkorlikni takomillashtirish yo‘lida,” *Oboronprom RUz/Mudofaa sanoati*, August 18, 2021, <https://telegra.ph/Ozbekiston-Xitoy-harbiy-texnikaviy-hamkorlikni-takomillashtirish-yolida-08-18>.

²⁷ The Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation, “The head of the Russian military department spoke at a meeting of the Council of Defense Ministers of the CSTO member states in Tajikistan,” April 27, 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12358348@egNews.

²⁸ “Russia and Tajikistan decided to integrate air defense systems,” *Vzglyad*, April 27, 2021, <https://vz.ru/news/2021/4/27/1096697.html>.

²⁹ The Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation, “Russia and Uzbekistan have developed a strategic partnership program in the military field,” April 28, 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12358606@egNews.

³⁰ “Meeting of Defense Ministers was held in Dushanbe,” *KAZINFORM*, July 28, 2021, https://www.inform.kz/ru/soveshanie-ministrov-oborony-proshlo-v-dushanbe_a3817344.

³¹ A. Gavrilenko and A. Tixonov, “In the spirit of strategic partnership,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, August 6, 2021, <https://postfactum.kz/en/obshchestvo/254-in-the-spirit-of-strategic-partnership>.

³² R. Biryulin, “In the interest of building mutual trust,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, August 9, 2021.

³³ “Kyrgyzstan will host a joint exercise with the Collective Rapid Deployment Force of the Central Asian region of collective security of the CSTO “Rubezh-2021”,” *CSTO*, August 26, 2021, https://odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/v-kyrgyzstane-sostoitsya-sovmestnoe-uchenie-s-kollektivnymi-silami-bystrogo-razvyertyvaniya-tsentral/#loaded.

Russian and Chinese joint military exercises also took place in 2021. The Russian-Chinese joint operational-strategic exercise “Xibu/Interaction-2021” was held in August,³⁴ and part of which was realized on the border with Afghanistan.³⁵ During the talks between the defense ministers of Russia and China on August 13, a memorandum on the establishment of institutional twinning was signed.³⁶

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states’ joint anti-terrorist exercise Peace Mission 2021 was held in September amidst the on-going uncertainties in Afghanistan.³⁷ “Against the background of the Taliban takeover the strengthening of the positions of ISIS and other terrorist organizations is of concern,” said the commander of the Russian Central Military District at the opening of the SCO military exercises.³⁸ “In the Central Asian region, we are witnessing a significant aggravation of the situation. The military-political situation around our states is becoming tenser. The completion of the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan has led to an essential increase of the terrorist threat in our common Eurasian space,” the commander stated. Following the exercises, the chiefs of the general staffs of the armed forces of the SCO members agreed to coordinate work to prevent threats emanating from Afghanistan. “We agreed to hold systematic consultations between our countries to prevent the overflow of destabilizing processes on the territory of the SCO member states,” said the Chief of Russian General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov.³⁹ According to him, the SCO partners currently consider the export of terrorist activity, the complication of humanitarian aid in connection with the influx of Afghan refugees, and the increase in drug trafficking to be the main threats emanating from Afghanistan. Gerasimov called on the SCO countries to join forces in the fight against terrorism and new tactics of militants: “In particular, it is necessary to work out the issues of combating unmanned aerial vehicles, ensuring information security, preventing terrorist attacks using chemical and biological weapons.”⁴⁰

³⁴ A. Tokhonov, “Friendship that strengthens peace,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, August 16, 2021.

³⁵ “Шойгу прибыл в Китай для наблюдения за совместными военными учениями,” [Shoygu pribyl v Kitay dlya nablyudeniya za sovmestnymi voyennymi ucheniyami], *Vedomosti*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/news/2021/08/12/881923-shoigu-pribil-v-kitai>.

³⁶ Tikhonov, “Friendship that strengthens.”

³⁷ The Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation, “Peace Mission 2021,” September 23, 2021, <https://structure.mil.ru/mission/practice/all/peace-2021.htm>.

³⁸ The Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation, “The opening ceremony of the Peace Mission 2021 joint exercise took place at the training ground near Orenburg,” 2021, <https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/centre/news/more.htm?id=12384758@egNews>.

³⁹ “Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces of the SCO countries will coordinate work to prevent threats emanating from the Afghan direction – Gerasimov,” *Interfax-AVN*, 2021, <https://www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=557678&lang=RU>.

⁴⁰ A. Arkadiev and P. Koltsov, “Gerasimov called on the SCO countries to join forces in the fight against terrorism and new tactics of militants,” *TV Zvezda*, 2021, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/20219231236-y41MW.html>.

Moscow tried to use possible threats from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover to strengthen its own influence in the region. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Moscow has been using uncertainties in Afghanistan as a means to exert influence on the Central Asian governments' security policies. Using the concerns of the region's political elites regarding Afghanistan, Moscow tries to develop bilateral relations with the regional states to strengthen and improve multilateral relations within Moscow-led organizations. In the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russia presents itself as a security guarantor for the region and provides benefits to member states through its arms imports.

Russia and China also activated diplomatic relations with the region states in 2021. In May 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Dushanbe to meet with his fellow foreign ministers from CSTO states.⁴¹ Lavrov stated that Dushanbe shares the opinion that the 201st Russian military base is a significant factor in the stability of Central Asia and that Russia and Tajikistan will soon sign an intergovernmental agreement, under which the Russian Federation will assist in the construction of a modern border post on the Tajik-Afghan border.⁴²

Since 2020 China have involved themselves diplomatically on security issues with the region's states. During the inaugural foreign ministers' meeting of China and the Central Asian states in July 2020, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi noted that the two sides had worked together to advance Belt and Road cooperation, combat terrorism, separatism, extremism, and cross-border crimes, and built strong people-to-people bonds.⁴³ One of the four areas of cooperation proposed by Wang is to uphold regional security and "act on the new vision of security" and emphasized problems such as terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Minister Wang stated that China and the Central Asian countries are deepening their cooperation to fight against those threats, "China calls for the early establishment of a cooperation mechanism to protect the safety and security of major Belt and Road projects to ensure the safe and smooth progress of important cross-border infrastructure projects. Peace talks should be encouraged to advance the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan."⁴⁴ At the second "China+Central Asia" (C+C5) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in May 2021 Chinese Foreign Minister stated that through reliance on bilateral or multilateral platforms such as the SCO and the CICA, China and the Central Asian countries will firmly crackdown on the East Turkestan Islamic

⁴¹ E. Chernenko, "Test of alliancing," *Kommersant*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4817450>.

⁴² Lavrov, "Russia will help Tajikistan build a new border post on the border with Afghanistan," TASS, May 19, 2021, <https://tass.ru/politika/11408327>.

⁴³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China and Central Asian Countries Hold Inaugural Foreign Ministers' Meeting," July 17, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1798547.shtml.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China and Central Asian Countries."

Movement, and the “three evil forces” of terrorism, extremism, and separatism.⁴⁵ According to him, those countries will strengthen cooperation on narcotics control and preventing transnational organized crime. Wang Yi noted that China supports the peace talks in the “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned” principle and that foreign troops should withdraw from Afghanistan in an orderly and responsible manner to ensure a stable transition in Afghanistan. He added that China and the Central Asian countries should leverage their respective strengths to play a constructive role. The six foreign ministers discussed the situation in Afghanistan and the role of neighboring countries, and reached an important consensus, reported the Chinese Foreign ministry. The Joint Statement on the Afghan Issue was released at that meeting.⁴⁶

Beijing’s main security interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia are to protect Belt and Road projects, ensure important cross-border infrastructure projects, fight against the “three evil forces” of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, and eliminate or weaken the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. To realize these goals, China needs to develop bilateral and multilateral relations within mainly Beijing-led platforms such as the SCO and the CICA.

Russian and Chinese security concerns after the Taliban takeover

There are many similarities in the relations between Russia and China with the Taliban. While both sides distrust the other in those relations, Russia and China both managed to find common ground with the Taliban after several years of complicated ties during the 2010s.

Developing relations with the Taliban is perceived by Moscow as one of the significant facets necessary to increase its influence in internal and international competition in Afghanistan.⁴⁷ By the mid-2010s the emergence of ISIS posed a serious challenge to the supremacy of the Taliban but also encouraged Russia, China, and Iran—who were all fearful of ISIS expansion—to review their policies and open dialogue with the Taliban.⁴⁸ In 2015, Moscow stated that the interests of the Taliban in the fight against the Islamic State in Afghanistan “objectively coincide with those of Russia” and confirmed that communication channels between Russia and the Taliban did exist.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Wang Yi Hosts “China+Central Asia” Foreign Ministers’ Meeting,” May 12, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1875496.shtml.

⁴⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Wang Yi Hosts.”

⁴⁷ N. Mendkovich, “Россия и «пуштунский фактор»,” [Rossiya i “pushtunskiy factor”], July 3, 2009, <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/15038.html>.

⁴⁸ D. Azami, “World powers jostle in Afghanistan’s new ‘Great Game’,” BBC World Service, January 12, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38582323>.

⁴⁹ “Замир Кабулов: Интересы талибов по борьбе с ИГИЛ в Афганистане объективно совпадают с российскими,” [Zamir Kabulov: Interesy talibov po bor’be s IGIL v Afganistane ob’yektivno sovpadayut s rossiyskimi], *Interfax*, December 23, 2015, <https://www.interfax.ru/interview/486757>.

Since 2014 Beijing has stepped up its engagement with the Taliban in part due to Pakistan's role as an ally of both China and the Taliban.⁵⁰ However, despite its growing ties with the Taliban, Beijing recognized President Ghani's government and engaged with Kabul to monitor Uyghur militants in Afghanistan. For some time however, China looked to strengthen its relations with both sides and attempted to use that leverage to push for a political solution between Kabul and the Taliban.⁵¹

After the Taliban regained power in 2021, the behavior of Russia and China did not deviate. Both maintained essentially a wait-and-see approach, and their embassies continued to work in Kabul. After the Taliban took control of Kabul, the Chinese Foreign Ministry reacted by saying that "on the basis of fully respecting the sovereignty of Afghanistan and the will of all factions in the country, China has maintained contact and communication with the Afghan Taliban and played a constructive role in promoting the political settlement of the Afghan issue".⁵²

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that Russia stands for an urgent transition to national dialogue in Afghanistan with the participation of all forces and emphasizing the role of the Moscow format on Afghanistan, saying that it has the greatest prospects for creating the conditions necessary to restarting inter-Afghan dialogue.⁵³

There are also uncertainties and concerns in Moscow and Beijing. They can be followed, especially in Russian officials' statements. Russian Defense Minister said the most significant threats posed by Afghanistan are the number of arms the Taliban has captured and the drugs.⁵⁴ According to Minister Sergey Shoigu, the Taliban captured hundreds of artillery pieces, armored vehicles, and air transport.⁵⁵ The Defense Ministry monitors the situation around Russian borders following the Taliban's return to power, and "those forces and means that should be involved, they will be used if necessary", stated the Russian Deputy Defense Minister.⁵⁶ Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolay Patrushev said that the priority task now is to ensure control over migration flows from Afghanistan, "to protect

⁵⁰ R. Standish, "Explainer: Why Is China Talking To The Taliban?," RFERL, July 21, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/explainer-china-taliban-afghanistan/31368531.html>.

⁵¹ Standish, "Explainer: Why Is China."

⁵² "Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on August 16, 2021," https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1899785.shtml.

⁵³ "Lavrov assessed the situation in Afghanistan," *RIA Novosti*, August 19, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210819/afghanistan-1746345454.html>.

⁵⁴ "Shoigu said about the threat because of the weapons that the Taliban got," *RIA Novosti*, August 24, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210824/shoigu-1747099439.html>.

⁵⁵ "Shoigu called the Taliban's aircraft and MANPADS threats to Russia," *RBK*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/08/2021/612540569a7947f06f22e99d>.

⁵⁶ "Defense Ministry monitors the situation around the Russian borders after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan," *Govorit Moskva*, August 20, 2021, <https://govoritmoskva.ru/news/284732/>.

the region from the movement of terrorists across the border under the guise of refugees, as well as from arms smuggling and drug trafficking".⁵⁷

President Putin also reflected his concerns saying that Moscow does not want militants under the disguise of refugees to again appear in Russia. Putin expressed his concern about a possible deterioration of societal and security conditions in Russia's Muslim regions and stated that it should be prevented "to at least somehow repeat the situation of the 1990s and early 2000s".⁵⁸

Moreover, Russia's approach regarding the developments in the Afghan Panjshir province in 2021 must be highlighted. Russian Ambassador to the country Zhirnov stressed that in Kabul, no one supported Vice President Saleh in August 2021.⁵⁹ Later Zhirnov stressed that the Taliban asked Russia to mediate in the Afghan dialogue and mentioned the negotiations between the Taliban and resistance in Panjshir.⁶⁰

A day later Russian media, citing the Herat Times, reported that an air bridge had been established between Tajikistan and the Panjshir Valley.⁶¹ Most probably, Dushanbe agreed to it with Moscow. It could also be a sign of Moscow's maneuvering between Afghan internal forces after August 15, 2021. Such a dichotomy could be explained by the frictions and preferences between the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the security institutions.

The principal means for Russia and China to profit from America's withdrawal might be their efforts to advance narratives of American decline and question its reliability. Chinese propaganda tried to exploit tragic images⁶² of America's abandonment of its Afghan partners as proof of American unreliability and incompetence.⁶³ China's effort specifically targeted domestic and international audiences. For its domestic audience, Beijing's message was that the United States

⁵⁷A. Zabrodin, "A similar situation awaits supporters of the American choice in Ukraine," *Izvestiya*, August 19, 2021, <https://iz.ru/1209165/aleksei-zabrodin/pokhozhaia-situatciia-ozhidaet-i-storonnikov-amerikanskogo-vybora-na-ukraine>.

⁵⁸ "Russia should prevent Afghani militants from entering its territory — Putin," *TASS*, August 22, 2021, <https://tass.com/world/1328789>.

⁵⁹ "Ambassador of the Russian Federation questioned the chances of the Vice President of Afghanistan Saleh to resist the Taliban," *Interfax*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/785109>.

⁶⁰A. Samozhnev, "Taliban asked Russia to mediate in the intra-Afghan dialogue," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, August 21, 2021, <https://rg.ru/2021/08/21/taliby-poprosili-rossiiu-o-posrednichestve-vo-vnutriafganskom-dialoge.html>.

⁶¹ "Air bridge Tajikistan - Panjshir established," *Sputnik-Tajikistan*, August 23, 2021, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20210823/nalazhen-vozdushnyy-most-tajikistan-panjshe-1041831090.html>.

⁶²R. Hass, "How will China seek to profit from the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan," *Brookings Institute*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-will-china-seek-to-profit-from-the-talibans-takeover-in-afghanistan/>.

⁶³Y. Sheng and C. Fandi, "Taliban's rapid victory embarrasses US, smashes image, arrogance," *Global Times*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231652.shtml>.

is not an object of worship. For the international audience, the message was that America's best days are behind it, and Afghanistan is one more proof of America's decline.⁶⁴ For China, it is an opportunity to strengthen its image in the region as well as with its regional partners. As Niva Yau put it, it is not just about trade— it's about image, it's about a long-term strategy for connecting the region and China's subsequent role in this.⁶⁵ Indeed, China provided support at a time when the Taliban was desperate for cooperation and partnership, particularly in humanitarian aid in 2021. However, the recent aid to Afghanistan in June 2022, delivered by Chinese military planes, was used in Chinese propaganda and contrasted side by side with American military planes.⁶⁶ Similarly, Russian officials and state-owned media propagated the United States' failure and unreliability and how other states should take lessons from Afghanistan.⁶⁷ As in the case of China, Moscow spread two messages. One, mostly aimed at the domestic audience, was the accelerating decline of U.S. global leadership. The other, mostly broadcast abroad, was the unreliability of the United States as an ally.⁶⁸ This latter message was particularly directed at Ukraine. It means Moscow tried to scare not only the Central Asian states but also other former Soviet republics with possibilities of the Afghan scenarios. For instance, Nikolay Patrushev stated that “supporters of the American choice in Ukraine will face a similar situation”.⁶⁹

The main concern shared by both Beijing and Moscow might be a possibility of support by the Taliban for religious groups in their regions (in the Caucasus, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan; in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region) and whether the victory of the Taliban may encourage Islamic movements in their territories. Ensuring that fighting or chaos from a potential power vacuum doesn't spill over is paramount for both.

⁶⁴ R. Hass, “How will China seek to profit from the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan,” *Brookings Institute*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-will-china-seek-to-profit-from-the-talibans-takeover-in-afghanistan/>.

⁶⁵ J. Goldkorn, “China is very active in Afghanistan one year after the U.S. withdrawal — Q&A with Niva Yau,” August 12, 2022, <https://thechinaproject.com/2022/08/12/china-is-very-active-in-afghanistan-one-year-after-the-u-s-withdrawal-qa-with-niva-yau/>.

⁶⁶ “Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao posted on Twitter,” June 28, 2022, <https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1542075861393846272>.

⁶⁷ A. Zabrodin, “Похожая ситуация ожидает и сторонников американского выбора на Украине,” [Pokhozhaya situatsiya ozhidayet i storonnikov amerikanskogo vybora na Ukraine], *Izvestiya*, August 19, 2021, <https://iz.ru/1209165/aleksei-zabrodin/pokhozhaia-situatciia-ozhidaet-i-storonnikov-amerikanskogo-vybora-na-ukraine>.

⁶⁸ “Afghanistan Under the Taliban,” *Carnegie Endowment*, August 18, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/18/afghanistan-under-taliban-pub-85168>.

⁶⁹ A. Zabrodin, “A similar situation awaits supporters of the American choice in Ukraine,” *Izvestiya*, August 19, 2021, <https://iz.ru/1209165/aleksei-zabrodin/pokhozhaia-situatciia-ozhidaet-i-storonnikov-amerikanskogo-vybora-na-ukraine>.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed preventing the spread of instability from Afghanistan to adjacent regions of Central Asia a day after leaders of the Group of Seven countries met to discuss the crisis in August 2021. The leaders also agreed to intensify bilateral contacts and for closer coordination between their foreign ministries.⁷⁰ Moreover, Putin noted that Russia and China share similar positions and common interests on the Afghanistan issue, and that his country is willing to work with China to push for a smooth transition of the situation in Afghanistan.⁷¹

However, amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the real possibility of a global grain crisis, the Russian Foreign Ministry mentioned the possibility of recognizing the Taliban government in June 2022. Special Representative of the Russian President for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov stated that the Taliban does not pose a threat to the Central Asia, and it has well-established political and diplomatic relations with at least Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.⁷² Moreover, representatives of the Taliban officially took part in the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022.⁷³ Those can be signs of the decreasing uncertainties in Moscow regarding the perspectives of relations with the Taliban government.

China opened a bilateral working group with the Taliban on humanitarian assistance and economic rebuilding in December 2021.⁷⁴ The initiatives discussed at the working group were: providing more humanitarian aid, facilitating the export of Afghan products to the PRC, the sharing of Chinese economic development lessons with the Taliban, Beijing's help in restarting mining in Afghanistan, realizing the connectivity potential of Afghanistan.⁷⁵ Recently Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi praised that the Taliban "spent a lot of efforts on stabilizing the situation and tried to provide public goods, there is some success" and that China supports

⁷⁰ "Telephone conversation with President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping," *The Kremlin*, August 25, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66450>.

⁷¹ "Xi-Putin call demonstrates shared will to strengthen ties, address global issues," *People's Daily Online*, August 27, 2021, http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off_the_Wire/2021-08/26/content_77716705.htm.

⁷² D. Erozbek, "МИД России допустил признание правительства талибов в Афганистане," [MID Rossii dopustil priznaniye pravitel'stva talibov v Afganistane], *Kommersant*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5410080>.

⁷³ S. Savchuk, "Россия готовит большие перемены для Афганистана," [Rossiya gotovit bol'shiye peremeny dlya Afganistana], *RIA Novosti*, June 16, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220616/afghanistan-1795617516.html>.

⁷⁴ "中国—阿富汗人道援助和经济重建工作层联络机制首次会议召开," [Zhōngguó-āfùhàn réndào yuánzhù hé jīngjì chóngjiàn gōngzuò céng liánluò jīzhì shǒucì huìyì zhàokāi], December 31, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw_673019/202112/t20211231_10477886.shtml.

⁷⁵ Yau, "China Takes Full Advantage."

international recognition of the Taliban government.⁷⁶ Moreover, the Afghan Embassy in Beijing re-opened in late April 2022.⁷⁷

Russo-Chinese cooperation on Afghanistan at the multilateral level

Besides bilateral cooperation on Afghanistan, Moscow and Beijing also tried to promote their agenda at the multilateral level, especially within the organizations they lead. For instance, during the joint meeting on Afghanistan of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization in September 2021, presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin pledged to join forces to prevent violence and instability spilling over Afghanistan's borders into the wider region.⁷⁸ Moreover, the countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization agreed to develop cooperation in defense. However, they will not “establish a military alliance or economic association” according to a joint declaration adopted at a meeting of the Council of Heads of member states of the SCO in September 2021.⁷⁹ The SCO leaders supported establishing a new Afghan government with representatives of all ethnic, religious, and political groups. The SCO stated that it advocates the formation of Afghanistan as “an independent, neutral, united, democratic and peaceful state, free from terrorism, war, and drugs”. “Countering terrorism in all its forms and manifestations will remain the SCO's priorities in ensuring regional security and stability” said the declaration. In this respect, the following initiatives are being considered: the establishment of the SCO Anti-Drug Center in Dushanbe as a separate permanent body; the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the SCO in Tashkent; and the Universal Center for Countering Security Challenges and Threats of the SCO in Russia. The establishments of the SCO Information Security Center in Kazakhstan and the Center for Countering International Organized Crime in Bishkek were also mentioned.⁸⁰ Although the statement on the creation of joint centers can be considered a political move, uncertainties regarding developments in Afghanistan—especially the deterioration of the situation there—may push the SCO states to launch more joint security projects.

Niva Yau, an expert on China's policies in the region, believes that when Beijing says it seeks to build regional consensus and management of Afghanistan, it does not mean for all countries to work together. Rather it means setting up an agreed list

⁷⁶ “王毅谈阿富汗临时政府外交承认问题,” [Wáng yì tán āfūhàn línshí zhèngfǔ wàijiāo chéngrèn wèntí], April 1, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzbzhd/202204/t20220401_10658461.shtml.

⁷⁷ Yau, “China Takes Full Advantage.”

⁷⁸ N. Astrasheuskaya, “Xi and Putin pledge to co-operate on Afghanistan after Taliban takeover,” *Financial Times*, September 17, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/c8d25a60-4e22-4f79-aac2-f53d106835a4?shareType=ongift>.

⁷⁹ “Страны ШОС приняли совместную декларацию,” [Strany SHOS prinyali sovместnuyu deklaratsiyu], TASS, September 17, 2021, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12433753>.

⁸⁰ “Страны ШОС приняли.”

of activities all regional countries should look to implement on their own, given their individual capacity differences. Yau stresses that it is obvious China's interested in positioning itself as the central player in pushing and organizing regional, and soon, global management of Afghanistan affairs.⁸¹ Russia is interested in the same as well. Therefore, there is a growing competition between the two powers at the multilateral level.

Is the U.S. involvement and its military bases in Central Asia threats or possibilities?

Another issue is the possibility of the U.S. using military bases in Central Asia in anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan.

Before the U.S. military's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Russian political and military elite understood that the U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan was in their common interests despite their suspicions and grievances on this issue. In October 2020, President Putin stated that the U.S. military's continued presence in Afghanistan is beneficial to common security, and Russia perceives the USA's anti-terrorist activities in Afghanistan positively. He noted that an American troop withdrawal could create additional conditions for "some kind of Afghan reconciliation", but there would also be many risks. "Firstly, we will have to fork out extra money to stability, and secondly, despite everything, the presence of the Americans in Afghanistan contributes to stability in the country, and their departure creates risks".⁸² Putin also said that Russia continues to cooperate with the United States at the level of security institutions. According to Putin, Moscow perceived United States activities in Afghanistan as anti-terrorist efforts.⁸³

After the Taliban takeover, reports that General Mark Milley discussed with General Valery Gerasimov an offer of the Russian President to use Russian military bases in Central Asia to respond to any emerging terrorist threats in Afghanistan brought attention to this issue in 2021.⁸⁴ Commenting on this, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov stated that "Russia's position on the unacceptability of the possible use by the United States of Russian military bases in Central

⁸¹ Yau, "China Takes Full Advantage."

⁸² "Putin considers US presence in Afghanistan beneficial to the security," *Kommersant*, October 25, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4547987>.

⁸³ "Putin considers US."

⁸⁴ M.R. Gordon and G. Lubold, "U.S. Asked Russia About Offer of Bases to Monitor Afghan Terror Threat," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 27, 2021. See also A. Desiderio and L. Seligman, "U.S. intensifies talks to use Russian bases for Afghan counterterrorism ops," *Politico*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/29/us-russia-bases-afghan-counterterrorism-514743>, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-asked-russia-about-offer-of-bases-to-monitor-afghan-terror-threat-11632767164>.

Asia has not changed.⁸⁵ Several days before the meeting of Milley and Gerasimov, the CSTO members unanimously opposed the deployment of the military bases of U.S. and NATO located in Afghanistan on their territories, on September 15, 2021.⁸⁶

Several Russian experts questioned such a possibility. Nikita Mendkovich stressed that after their withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States is considering ways to base in Central Asia to create power projection against Russia and China, and information about “negotiations” with Russia on this issue is spread by the U.S. to reach an agreement with leaders of the Central Asian states.⁸⁷ The former head of the Main Directorate of International Military Cooperation of the Russian Defense Ministry, Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov, said that the appearance of the U.S. military at Russian bases and even negotiations on this topic could be negatively perceived by China and the Central Asian states. Ivashov added that it would be beneficial for the United States to deploy more troops in Central Asia after leaving Afghanistan, to further its efforts at controlling Russia and containing China.⁸⁸ However, another expert, Alexey Malashenko, believes that the deployment of the U.S. military at Russian bases in Central Asia may have positive results. “In this case, both sides will show that they are not aggressive, that they are ready to interact, especially when it comes to the fight against terrorism,” said Malashenko.⁸⁹

Previously Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned his Central Asian colleagues about the risks associated with the U.S. request to deploy new military bases in the region’s countries and thousands of Afghans collaborating with the Americans. Not wanting to allow the United States to regain a foothold in Central Asia, Moscow, offered Washington an alternative—to use Russian bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to control the situation in Afghanistan.⁹⁰ The former head of the international treaty department of the Russian Defense Ministry General Yevgeny Buzhinsky explained Moscow’s maxims behind the initiative. According to him, if relations between Russia and the United States would improve, all sanctions lifted, cooperation

⁸⁵ “Ryabkov called the reports about the use of Russian bases in Asia by the United States as targeted information,” *RIA Novosti*, September 30, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210930/vbros-1752561578.html>.

⁸⁶ “Statement of the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization on the situation in Afghanistan,” *CSTO*, September 15, 2021, <https://odkb-csto.org/>.

⁸⁷ Mendkovich, “US attempts to deploy military bases in Central Asia are directed against Russia and China,” *Sputnik-YouTube Channel*, October 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IugJV5zloY>.

⁸⁸ “Former Head of the Department of Defense of the Ministry of Defense believes that Russia will not agree to the deployment of the US military at bases in Central Asia,” *Interfax-AVN*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=557923&lang=RU>.

⁸⁹ “Former Head of the Department.”

⁹⁰ M. Belenkaya *et al.*, “Extended “base” hand to Washington,” *Kommersant*, July 16, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4907714#id2118238>.

between the defense departments is established, then, theoretically, to use Russian bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is possible.⁹¹

While publicly Russia and China insist that the U.S. is out of the region and cannot have a military footprint in the countries that border them, Moscow and Beijing might want to have some U.S. military involvement in Central Asia, supposing it isn't a significant and permanent presence and focuses on counterterrorism. Despite official statements, they also want to share the burden of securing stability in the region with the United States. Such approaches can be called the dichotomy of the Russian and Chinese attitudes towards U.S. military presence and anti-terror operations in the region. If indeed there were negotiations between Washington and Moscow regarding the use of the Russian military bases in Central Asia, Russia, most probably, informed its "strategic partner" China about the results. On the other hand, Moscow might want to bargain with Washington on the military bases in Central Asia to gain benefits in other issues of bilateral relations. However, reactions of Russian officials meant that Moscow did not reach an agreement with Washington. Moreover, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the possible use of Russian military bases by the U.S. military can—for the time being—be considered unrealistic. The U.S. Central Command-sponsored Regional Cooperation 22 military exercise, hosted by Tajikistan in August 2022 were criticized by the Russian experts.⁹²

About the cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan Andrei Tsygankov argued that the Kremlin was indeed prepared to increase its regional cooperation with NATO in the 2010s and his research does not support the view that Russia aimed primarily to strengthen its advantage and undermine the West. However, he stressed that Russia does not see its relationship with the West as one of equal cooperation and is not satisfied with the level of recognition they receive from Western nations.⁹³ Although Tsygankov's arguments are questionable, he published his paper in 2013. Nevertheless, Tsygankov concluded in 2013 that Russia's interests in Afghanistan rest to a significant degree on its relationship with the West. Tsygankov believes that emotional responses to future unfavorable developments may prompt Russia to redefine its national interests by obstructing the West's pursuit of its international objectives.⁹⁴ Scott Bohn argues that Moscow attempts to balance two

⁹¹ I. Alshaeva, "Let the Americans hosted our soldiers. This is barter," *Gazeta.ru*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2021/09/28/14029915.shtml?updated>.

⁹² U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan: REGIONAL COOPERATION 2022 Military Exercise Begins in Dushanbe. August 10, 2022; See for Russian experts thoughts on the exercise: V. Panfilova, "Таджикистан стал полигоном для военных из США но не из РФ," [Tadjikistan stal poligonom dlya voyennykh iz SSHA, no ne iz RF], *Nezovisimaya Gazeta*, August 11, 2022, https://www.ng.ru/cis/2022-08-11/1_8511_tajikistan.html, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/3123432/regional-cooperation-2022-military-exercise-begins-in-dushanbe/>.

⁹³ A.P. Tsygankov, "Russia's Afghanistan Debate," *Problems of Post Communism* 60, no. 6 (2013): 29–41, 38.

⁹⁴ Tsygankov, "Russia's Afghanistan Debate," 29–41, 38.

overarching objectives: stabilize Afghanistan and maintain Russia's hegemony in Central Asia. "Russian fluctuations toward Afghanistan since 2001" he writes, "stemmed from changes in its perceived interests and its prioritization of these two objectives".⁹⁵ He also noted that a reduced NATO presence in Afghanistan may increase Russia's comparative influence in Central Asia, but "will also increase its burden toward ensuring a stable Afghanistan".⁹⁶

Russia and China have not only increased cooperation regarding economic matters but also in security and international institutions. Amid the active phase of the war in Ukraine, the Russian and Chinese presidents stressed that Russia and China, "as before, act from a common or very close position, consistently uphold the fundamental principles of international law, and seek to build a truly multipolar and fair system of international relations".⁹⁷

Considering the abovementioned developments raises a question, where are possibilities for competition between Russia and China in Afghanistan and Central Asia? As explained by the neorealist school, competitions or even conflicts are common among states because the international system creates powerful incentives for aggression.⁹⁸ According to offensive realist thought, the best way for a state to survive in anarchy is to take advantage of other states and gain power at their expense.⁹⁹ As John Mearsheimer puts it, great powers almost always have revisionist intentions, and they will use force to alter the balance of power if they think it can be done at a reasonable price.¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, Russia's behavior towards former Soviet republics, especially its invasion of Ukraine, increases the concerns of the Central Asian elites and pushes them to look for further balancing.¹⁰¹

Since the 2000s Russia has been a main security provider for Central Asia and while power is an important factor in the alliance calculations of relatively small states, it is not the only one. As Stephen Walt notes rather than allying in response to

⁹⁵ S. Bohn, "Russia's Afghanistan Policy: An Irresolute Strategy for an Uncertain Future," *Comparative Strategy* 33, no. 3 (2014): 205–221.

⁹⁶ Bohn, "Russia's Afghanistan Policy," 216.

⁹⁷ President Rossii, "Телефонный разговор с Председателем КНР Си Цзиньпином," [Telefonnyy razgovor s Predsedatelem KNR Si TSzin'pinom], June 15, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68658>.

⁹⁸ J.J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 5–56. E. Stepanova, "Мирный процесс по Афганистану и роль России," [Mirnyy protsess po Afganistanu i rol' Rossii], *Puti k miru i bezopasnosti*. № 2(57), 2019.

⁹⁹ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 36, <https://wnorton.com/books/9780393349276>.

¹⁰⁰ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2.

¹⁰¹ O. Baldakova, "Kazakhstan's three-way balancing act between competing powers is under pressure," 2022, <https://merics.org/en/kazakhstan-s-three-way-balancing-act-between-competing-powers-under-pressure>.

power alone, it is more accurate to say that states will ally with or against the most threatening power. “For example, states may balance by allying with other strong states, if a weaker power is more dangerous for other reasons”.¹⁰²

A demand for other great powers with which to balance is acute when the U.S. presence in the region is diminishing. Therefore, China is currently—and likely for the foreseeable future—the main regional power through which to balance, and even potentially deter, possible Russian aggression. Such a situation might even be a cause of conflict of interests between Russia and China.

Conclusion

Based on the used methods, the paper used reports, interviews, existing academic works and information on the ground, and the analyses here cover the main issues and possible development trends in relations between Russia and China in the region. However, we could not succeed to conduct in-depth interviews with decision makers and experts of Russia, China and the region countries, and using such method may strength perspective works on the problem.

Based on the analysis above, this paper concludes that Russia and China currently pursue two main strategic objectives in Afghanistan and the adjacent region: strengthening their influences in the region and preventing the United States’ power projection in Central Asia.

Answering the main and additional research questions and examining the hypothesis, the paper stresses that after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, regional security is now the business of the regional powers, mainly China and Russia. Unlike Washington however, Moscow and Beijing cannot walk away geographically, and they should bear the responsibilities and share the burdens. Russia and China will try to take advantage of the instability in the region by stepping up their security and economic influences in Central Asia. Stabilizing Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the U.S., on the other hand, ironically may increase competition between China and Russia in Central Asia.

Between 2001 and 2021 the main shared threats for Moscow and Beijing in the region were the permanent U.S. military bases and the possibility of its power projection in Central Asia using Afghanistan, and threats from the Taliban, based on their close relations with terrorist groups. Those threats have bound Moscow and Beijing together since 2001. This paper argues that there is probably more ground for competition after eliminating those threats in Afghanistan and especially in Central Asia for Moscow and Beijing. And this is because states, especially great powers such as Russia and China, must continually attempt to increase their relative power, ensuring that rivals or current partners will or may challenge them in the future.

¹⁰² S.M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 8–9, 3–43.

However, Russia and China will continue to try to align their interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia, especially if their relations with U.S. remain at the current level or worsen in the coming years. We may conclude that the competition between them will speed up if relations between the United States and one—or both—stabilize. As Afghanistan and Central Asia are located between two powers, the region's strategic importance pushes Russia and China to safeguard their own interests there. Each side will continue trying to ensure that the other's power doesn't grow in the region. In any future scenario, the main competition between them may happen primarily in this region. Finally, in a bipolar or multipolar international system—which the world has entered—China and Russia will continue to behave in a realist fashion which is why they will concern themselves with the balance of power in that region.

Data availability

The data for this article consists of bibliographic references, which are included in the References section.