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Central Asia and the Great Powers After Afghanistan

Dr Stephen J. Blank

Distinguished Fellow (Eurasia), Tillotoma Foundation

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Dr Stephen J. Blank

Dr Stephen J. Blank is a globally renowned expert on Eurasia. He is a Distinguished Fellow (Eurasia) at Tillotoma Foundation and Senior Fellow at Foreign Policy Research Institute's Eurasia Program.

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The very title of this paper equating Central Asia with the great powers underscores the fundamental changes sweeping this region. We have long since abandoned the era of the Great Game where local governments could not assert themselves against the great powers. Today Central Asian governments, or, more precisely, some of them, not only can stand on their own, but are also forging new links among their neighbors and fostering more truly cooperative projects than was hitherto the case. In political science terms Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, if not the other three Central Asian states, have acquired and are demonstrating agency. Thus they are taking proactive steps to strengthen each other and Afghanistan at present. Indeed, both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan are providing assistance to Tajikistan and Afghanistan as described below. Thus, a new era has emerged.

Western and Russian analysts have accepted the agency of Central Asian governments even if, for Russia, for example, the imperial syndrome still exercises an influence over Russian perceptions of Central Asia.¹ For example, a recent American report observes that, today,

Central Asian leaders are better placed to pursue multi-vector policies, including balancing neighboring powers and creating a wider array of strategic partnerships than the region has seen since independence. Across the board Central Asian republics are embedding their defense sectors within diffuse new networks of arms suppliers, instructors, and partners across Europe, Asia, and North America.²

Moreover, this multi-vector tendency also reflects a growing regionalism among Central Asian states, most notably Uzbekistan.³ This regionalism exists alongside of the more traditional and well-known great power rivalries across Central Asia. However, that great power rivalry must take account of regional dynamics and do so in unprecedented ways. Though international rivalry or competition for influence here continues it embraces both local governments and major Asian actors, not Europe or the U.S. This does not mean that great power rivalries are dead and buried. Obviously, the Sino-Russian alliance is challenging U.S. and European presence in Central Asia even as there may be strains within



that alliance relationship.⁴ But as shown below regional actors are trying to reduce the fallout from great power rivalry by asserting their own regional interests. This has special relevance for Washington because it is being forced out of Afghanistan and unless it restructures its policies to take account of this multipolarity – to call it by its rightful name – it risks further marginalization in Central Asia.⁵ Meanwhile the EU has never become a major player in Central Asia.

The denouement of the U.S. expedition to Afghanistan provides a revealing series of indicators about this Central Asian agency and the polycentric or regionally multipolar quality of interstate relations here. The dynamic transformative quality of contemporary world politics has profoundly transformed the role of Central Asia in the current situation and for the future. For the foreseeable future it is likely to be one of the theaters where major global and regional powers interact in fluid and dynamic way i.e. an “in-between region”, like Eastern Europe was and still is.

The world is not descending into a second Cold War between the US and China. Rather, a multifaceted competition featuring the European Union, Turkey, India, Russia, Japan, Australia, Brazil, and others has replaced the Pax Americana. It is a shift that will be most pronounced in the regions located between these powers. The most important of these regions are Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Central Asia – the zones of conflict where the balance of power of the future is to be decided.⁶

If this assessment is correct then Central Asia will likely be a political equivalent of Matthew Arnold’s “darkling plain where ignorant armies clash by night.” But it is likely that those clashes will be largely political and economic, and not necessarily violent. While the nature of future regional politics depends greatly on the political will and skill of the leaders involved; there are ample reasons for believing that both local and external state actors will confront each other in Central Asia in multiple ways, particularly once NATO and the U.S. leave Afghanistan. Indeed, even if external actors are reluctant to increase their investment in Central Asia, the logic of their strategic interests, e.g. Washington’s desire to maintain a military profile and defend its allies and interests in Afghanistan from



another nearby territory or China's nexus of internal security challenges that it perceives from its failure to deal with its Muslim minority that has led. It to genocidal policies at home, can and likely will place them in confrontational (though not necessarily violent) relationships. In other words, even if Washington wants to extricate itself from Central Asia, the geopolitical demands of its rivalry with China, and similarly the domestic security imperatives of Chinese policy will oblige them to compete with each other there. Thus, Kamran Bokhari, Director of Analytical Development at the Newlines Institute For Strategy & Policy pointedly observed that,

Secretary of State Antony Blinken is wrong when he says that the United States is exiting Afghanistan because it needs to commit resources on countering China. The two goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive of one another. On the contrary, Washington can do both by strategically engaging with Central Asia. Reliable regional partners such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, who are eager to enhance their relationship with the United States, have an imperative to ensure that a post-American Afghanistan does not threaten international security and prevent China from dominating their region.⁷

Even though few if any Asian states, including Central Asian governments, are eager to be forced to choose between Washington and Beijing, an American policy that works with them on a whole of government basis to defend against terrorism and uphold their sovereignty and improved economic-political performance and governance would, by definition, reduce the scope for either Russian or Chinese, not to mention joint-Russo-Chinese machinations here. But for Washington to realize that upgrading its presence in Central Asia on this basis materially benefits both it and its local partners, it needs to awake to those conclusions and the dawning importance of Central Asia in a multipolar-world. Also, despite earlier efforts by the Trump Administration to enhance its regional profile and counter China, that awakening has evidently not yet occurred for or to the Biden Administration.⁸

Nevertheless, and despite what American policymakers may think, in Central Asia, the extent of the U.S. presence is directly correlated in public opinion surveys with respondents' sense of how China



is faring there. Evidently Bokhari's argument enjoys at least some corroboration from the evidence of these surveys. Or to put it another way, an American failure to engage Central Asia more broadly and deeply redounds to the benefit of China at America's expense in both the regional and global contexts. Moreover, the previous fixation on Afghanistan and support for forces there clearly led several administrations into a bilateral neglect of the region that has had visible consequences as far as public opinion and local governments are concerned. Thus, the U.S. China Commission reported in 2020 that,

There is significant risk that Beijing may be able to leverage its relationships with the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) countries to limit the ability of U.S. armed forces to operate in Central Asia. At its 2005 summit the SCO issued a statement calling for a timeline for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Pressure from China and Russia likely contributed to Uzbekistan's decision later that year to evict the United States from Karshi-Khanabad Air Base, which the United States used to support operations in Central Asia. Despite the fact that Central Asian states desire choices and do not want to be overly reliant on either Chinese or Russian security assistance, U.S. security assistance for countries other than Afghanistan has fallen precipitously from a high of \$497 Million in 2012 to \$41 million in 2020 – a roughly 92 percent drop. As the United States continues to draw down its forces from Afghanistan, China will be likely to continue to eclipse U.S. influence in this region. The trend is already apparent in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where a 2016 survey showed a significant percentage of respondents believing China already held more influence than the United States in Asia, with an even greater percentage expecting China's influence to continue growing at the expense of the United States.⁹

Therefore, there is a direct correlation between the visibility and extent of U.S. presence and the perceived standing of its main rival, China, in Central Asia whatever Washington does. Clearly engaging Central Asia is not just a matter of sound regional policy to sustain American interests in Afghanistan and regionally, it is a sound Asian if not global geopolitical investment. Indeed, a policy that places its emphasis on sustaining American interests in Afghanistan and only secondarily on developing a broadly-based and enduring network of relationships across Central Asia is preordained to fail. A potential convergence of interests between Washington and leading Central Asian states, particularly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, is likely to be welcomed in Central Asia as long as it does not



draw local governments into the maelstrom of war and intense confrontation with China and/or Russia but instead allows them to add another, stronger, card to their “game” of multi-vector policies. While that fact may clash with Washington’s current quest for military bases in Central Asia to preserve some modicum of leverage in Afghanistan, it also means that without a broader and more attractive American offer of support to Central Asian states through this multi-dimensional engagement will be spurned *ab initio*.

One major reason for this, by no means the only one, but still an important consideration, is the point mentioned at the outset, namely that Central Asian states now possess agency and can choose whom they wish to affiliate with and on which issue. A recent article by the Russian scholar Denis Borisov of Novosibirsk University, confirms the aforementioned trend towards multipolarity in regard to Central Asia. Borisov argues that the trend by which Central Asian governments have regained agency as de facto independent actors in regional processes reflects the advent of a multipolar world order and that within this macro-trend we can see the regionalization of multipolarity whereby in key regions like Central Asia multiple powers are able to intervene and play a role in the shaping of the regional order.¹⁰In Central Asia the regional picture is one of multiple intra-regional and external powers all contending for a role with the external powers being Russia, China, the U.S. Turkey, India, the EU and one could add Pakistan, South Korea, and Japan.¹¹ Thus the main dynamic of inter-state relations now occurs at the regional level where these powers compete. In Central Asia we therefore see truly polycentric patterns and relations of competition among these many states and thus broaden the range of opportunities for Central Asian governments to pursue their various “multi-vector relationships as subjects enjoying agency, not objects of others’ designs.¹² Should Washington enhance its presence within this polycentric framework, it would strengthen rather than disturb this multipolarity and create



space for other players like India to emulate its experience. And the converse is true, namely a predominant or exclusive fixation on the military dimension will nullify any prospects for a more enduring and successful relationship between Washington and Central Asian governments. Arguably the same case can be made with regard to India, especially as India, by all accounts has faced enormous difficulties in and failures in maximizing its potential with regard to Central Asia.¹³

This “polycentric” trend among great and important regional powers in Central Asia is making itself particularly visible in regard to the jockeying for influence and position in Central Asia (including Afghanistan) once NATO and U.S. forces leave the region. But the Afghan issue is by no means the only major policy issue that occurs within this multipolar or polycentric framework. We may discern at least three powerful regional trends that interact with each other and the broader trend towards multipolarity and that will shape the future of the many rivalries that we can see in Central Asia. The first trend, as noted above, is the now open struggle for Afghanistan’s future once NATO and the U.S. forces leave the scene. The second is the emerging and already visible stratification among Central Asian states where Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are moving towards a broader concept of regional cooperation and more independent foreign policies while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are falling ever more behind and showing increasing inability to free themselves either from their domestic pathologies of governance or from the designs of Russia and China. The recent Kyrgyz-Tajik conflicts over land and water reflect this trend. Those tensions apparently date back to 2014 but they have now risen to the interstate level leading analysts to express concerns that if de-escalation does not occur, we can expect the complete transition of this conflict to the interstate level, “affecting interethnic relations, internationalization – that is, the involvement of third countries -- an arms race and so on.”¹⁴ Meanwhile Turkmenistan remains a “black box.”



This Tajik-Kyrgyz conflict reflects the fact that these are the two weakest states in Central Asia and thus the most in danger of either internal disintegration or of external predation if not both. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, both of whom are either offering assistance to Afghanistan or working on major projects with it are clearly vastly stronger states. The distinction between these kinds of states appears in the writings of the Serbian scholar F. Ejdus who observed that,

Strong states are those that have full positive or empirical sovereignty and can deliver public goods to their citizens who in return accept power as legitimate. Weak states are those that, due to the dire economic situation, ethnic or religious differences, cannot deliver public goods to all citizens who in return question the government in part or the whole territory.¹⁵

Obviously, such states are constantly vulnerable to tensions within and without and the invocation of a foreign enemy next door is a long-standing tactic of rulers in such states to preserve their power and system of government intact.¹⁶ Not only are these two states in constant tension with each other they are also states whose sovereignty is to some degree compromised due to their dependence upon assistance from Russia and China as well as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Finally, and by no means the weakest of these trends is the visible great power contestation which in Central Asia often appears as Sino-Russian coordination if not alliance against the U.S. This rivalry manifests itself in China's Belt and Road Initiative, the growing cooperation between Beijing and Moscow, and Russia's continuing reliance on its military levers of influence to keep Central Asia as (in some sense) a sphere of influence. This great power rivalry goes on even without direct reference to the war in Afghanistan but certainly interacts with it. In this context many writers have pointed to a so-called division of labor between China and Russia here where China has long since emerged as the region's leading economic power and trade and investment partner while leaving the field of defense and hard security to Russia.¹⁷ This aspect of Borisov's multipolarity confirms not just that concept but also his view of polycentrism. This competition not only creates and intensifies rivalries and alignments



among the great powers; it also facilitates Central Asian independence in policymaking since these powers are competing, *inter alia*, for influence in these Central Asian states. Consequently, a failure of state-building, as we see in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, not only weakens the state from within it deprives it of the means of competing effectively among Central Asian states and of asserting its prerogatives against either Washington, Beijing, Moscow, or anyone else. This fact exemplifies the interaction among these three trends in Central Asia.

At the same time, and given the inherent dynamism of contemporary world politics this alleged division of labor between Russia and China might be more unstable than it looks since we can discern tangible increases in China's military deployments and visibility in Central Asia, particularly with regard to Afghanistan and Tajikistan.¹⁸ On the one hand, heightened fears for security as Afghanistan appears to be falling into the Taliban's hands may redound to Moscow's benefit since it advertises its role as provider of security. On the other hand, however, China has steadily if slowly increased its hard security presence to the point of bases in Tajikistan near the Afghan border and other programs like arms sales and foreign military training.¹⁹ Given the extent of its investment in the BRI and fears for domestic security, this projection of power may well increase over time if Afghanistan disintegrates into civil war. Moreover, as part of this multipolar process we now see a growing interest on Turkey's part to provide security, not only at Kabul Airport, but to play a larger role across Central Asia.²⁰

The U.S. and NATO Departure From Afghanistan, and Russo-Chinese Reactions

This departure represents a crucial determinant of the current regional equation in Central Asia and its consequences will reverberate across the region for some time to come and help shape future alignments and relationships. More to the point, the actions of all the interested governments here show the interaction of the trends cited above as they prepare for the next round of events in Central



Asia. Washington and NATO's withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan signifies the end of all European attempts, including that of the USSR, to reshape Afghanistan or, more accurately implant a state, conceived of in the Western manner, there. All these efforts ended in striking and incontestable strategic failures. Indeed, the entire process and concept of state building in Afghanistan appears to be inherently problematic if not beyond the skill set of would-be rulers within and without that state.²¹ Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the U.S. effort failed and if financial support is terminated in the future then the state and army will fail again.²²

Although many in the U.S. military and political elite lament the decision to withdraw, and rightly express concern about the threat of a bloodbath afterwards directed against pro-Western forces and figures in Afghanistan the hard fact remains that despite twenty years of effort there is no viable theory of victory, i.e. an end to the Taliban and a functioning legitimate state in Afghanistan that is currently attainable or that commands domestic support in the U.S. This outcome reflects not only the U.S. and NATO's failure in Afghanistan but equally if not more importantly, it reflects the failure of the Afghan government, like so many other of its predecessors, to establish a secure and legitimate authority there.²³ Afghanistan is a paradigmatic weak state, as defined above. Afghan leaders may proclaim that the government will successfully defend itself against the Taliban and that the population will not accept Taliban rule.²⁴ But there is no evidence that the first assertion is valid. In fact, the evidence contradicts such statements. As of this writing (May-June, 2021) the Afghan army appears to be collapsing in rural districts who are surrendering en masse to the Taliban, a phenomenon that recalls the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975.²⁵ Fleeing Afghan soldiers are now turning up in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, reflecting the collapse of the army and the impending failure of the overall Afghan state-building project.²⁶ Not surprisingly, we already see militias springing into action against the Taliban, which is another sign of



the collapse of the state since the abiding essence of statehood is the monopoly over the legitimate use of force.²⁷

Privately U.S. military officials fear that without Western support the Afghan military would not last more than 1-2 years despite the enormous investment made in them.²⁸ But in view of the visible collapse of the army and the disarray concerning whether the U.S. and American contractors can sustain the Afghan air force, the U.S. intelligence community is now reporting that the state will collapse within six months of the U.S. withdrawal.²⁹ And while the population, which has undergone a serious socio-economic-cultural transformation in the last twenty years may well rebel against the Taliban that only means that civil war will continue once NATO and the U.S. depart.

Certainly, foreign intelligence agencies, who are not prone to be swayed by sentiment, apparently believe that the government will collapse. They are already evaluating, courting, and presumably recruiting non-governmental regional leaders to provide intelligence about terrorist threats and probably will also resist the Taliban on behalf of these agencies' governments after the U.S. withdrawal.³⁰ For example, many foreign agencies are courting the son of fabled Afghan fighter Ahmad Shah Massoud, a Tajik who led the fighting against the Taliban until he was killed in 2001. Given the Taliban's Pashtun leadership and composition, a renewed fighting with Afghanistan's Tajik population is by no means inconceivable if they take power.³¹ There can be no doubt that, such efforts by foreign intelligence to recruit an untried leader as an insurgent against the Taliban to perpetrate counter-terrorism represents not only their assessment of state failure but also a wager on it.

Even considering an unproven militia leader for possible counterterrorism assurances as international forces leaves undermines the last two decades of state-building analysts say, and practically turns the idea of an impending civil war into an expected reality by empowering anti-government forces even more. Such divisions are rife for exploitation by the Taliban.³²



Indeed, Massoud has reached out to the U.S., the U.K., France, India, Iran, and Russia. And we can be reasonably certain that these last three states will continue to play a role in Afghanistan presumably along with the U.S. even if France and the UK opt for a less prominent role there.³³

But Massoud and foreign intelligence communities notwithstanding, civil war will likely continue because the Taliban has not shown the slightest evidence of a willingness to accommodate the modernized elements of Afghan society or any capacity for self-government. Its recent attack on a girls' high school demonstrates both its brutality and ongoing incompatibility and irreconcilability with modernization trends in Afghan society.³⁴ The subsequent attack on unarmed people in a mining camp that the Taliban denied being involved in only indicates, if they are telling the truth, that they cannot control their own units.³⁵ There is no sign that it will tolerate or accept the legitimacy of modernization trends that have made a deep impact on Afghanistan in the last two generations and that irreconcilable attitude presages a civil war and large-scale internal violence. Moreover, the dominance of the Pashtun element in the Taliban also does not augur well for its reception by other tribes e.g. Tajiks. Therefore, the forces that led the insurgency against the Taliban some twenty years ago will probably rise again albeit under changed circumstances, and given the plethora of foreign governments who are already intervening in Afghanistan and the fact that Massoud's example shows that dissident Afghans are by no means hesitant about reaching out to foreign sponsors the requirements for a renewed civil war are already well developed.

Furthermore, the Taliban's own ideology and lack of ability to control the foreign fighters in its midst suggests that there will be elements within it who will strive to spread the Jihad into Central Asia despite rhetoric to the contrary. This possibility will do much to enliven the long-running argument that Central Asia is on the verge of being engulfed by terrorists, an argument that has long been overhyped



but serves local governments, Moscow, and Beijing as excellent pretexts for intervention here and for authoritarian governance.³⁶ Thus, the intractability of Afghanistan's problems will most likely and tragically devolve into another round of warfare, this time largely civil strife. But civil war only invites foreign intervention, which is already occurring. This time, however, it will be almost an exclusively Asian rivalry, i.e. one among contending Asian states. The equally long-running Indo-Pakistani rivalry for influence in Afghanistan will undoubtedly continue. China, who has now invested billions or even trillions of dollars in Central Asia and its Belt and Road Initiative and is so frightened of potential Muslim terrorism in Xinjiang that it has launched a genocide there, is already expanding its military presence by creating bases in the Tajik-Afghan borderland and may well feel impelled to deploy still more forces to the Central Asian theater.³⁷

Finally, Moscow has been running guns and providing intelligence support to the Taliban since 2013 in the misbegotten belief that the Taliban will not permit terrorism in Central Asia and in order to give Washington and Brussels a black eye while asserting its own role in Central Asia. Typically, Russian policy is openly opportunistic, supporting Taliban and insisting upon even expanding its defense role in Central Asia.³⁸ Indeed, Russia, quite characteristically, is hedging its bets trying to work with both the Taliban and the government. Moscow remains true to its now global pattern of hunting with the hounds and running with the hares. Apart from its previous support for the Taliban it continues to insist that the Taliban be brought into the new government under an earlier peace plan worked out by Washington and the Taliban and the Taliban should agree to uphold civil rights and break its ties with Pakistan.³⁹ But at the same time it is pursuing commercial deals with the Afghan government, e.g. selling it Covid-19 vaccines and trying to enter into a joint Afghan-Uzbek railroad project to Pakistan.⁴⁰ Moreover, the Afghan government is now willing to buy weapons from Russia, suggesting obviously



previous Russian offers for such weapons, especially helicopters.⁴¹ Thus Moscow may well soon end up selling weapons to both sides as well as to Pakistan, as it has done for some time now. This outcome is a sign of true opportunism but not of mature strategic reflection. While Moscow also believes it must remain in contact with all key regional leaders, not least Atta Muhammad Nur, the leader of Afghanistan's Tajiks, in effect it is chasing dollars and placing its bets across the Afghan roulette table.⁴² Some may think this strategic but this kind of "hedging policy", if one can call it that, reflects more opportunism than thoughtful deliberation. In this context it is worth citing a recent assessment of Russian policy here.

Russia, meanwhile, is a player whose goals are ultimately unclear, and in any case change with the situation. Moscow is prepared to undermine the authority of the central government by treating regional figures like full-fledged political authorities. Its alliance with unofficial northern leaders – ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks – is more important than with southern leaders (the Taliban) but will still come in useful. This approach should enable Russia to retain its levers of influence in Afghanistan if the country falls into chaos and the central government collapses. It does, of course, seriously complicate relations with Kabul, which is open to constructive dialogue with Moscow, despite its dependence upon Washington. But being located much closer to Afghanistan's borders than the United States, Russia cannot afford to take the risk of adopting a more one-sided strategy.⁴³

At the same time, the assessment of state collapse in the emerging situation and likelihood of continuing violence in and around Central Asia naturally stimulates the threat assessments of Central Asian governments. This assessment may be overstated as was the whole discourse of threat in Central Asia since 1991.⁴⁴ Nevertheless the threat of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan need not be exaggerated as it is real enough. Already by mid-2013 Taliban incursions into Turkmenistan were jeopardizing its ability to ensure security along and within its borders.⁴⁵ Taliban rule would likely generate a situation expanding such threats and duplicating them in neighboring Tajikistan thereby bringing both the Russian and Chinese militaries there into play. The danger of this happening again is by no means inconsequential. As of this writing Taliban forces have already reached the Tajik border



and there is palpable concern in Central Asian capitals, as well as Moscow if not Beijing about the possible re-ignition of terrorism across the region.⁴⁶ Therefore these governments are looking for support even as Washington offers them that security on the basis of an expanded portfolio of economic-political engagement it might then gain not only those bases but a more solid relationship with some if not most Central Asian governments. But in that case, it will then have to confront, as will those governments, heightened Chinese and Russian opposition to its presence in Central Asia.

Thus, it is not surprising that America is looking for bases in Central Asia to host its troops after they depart from Afghanistan, provide residual support for the Afghan military and government, and sustain its interests there.⁴⁷ Whatever Central Asian states may think about such possibilities to ensure their security, there is no doubt that any such action would immediately trigger a furious -Taliban-Sino-Russian opposition. The Taliban immediately warned the U.S. and Central Asian governments about stationing forces in Central Asia thereby raising the threat of terrorism beyond Afghanistan.⁴⁸ Russia too immediately started criticizing U.S. policy and warning Central Asian governments against allowing such deployments despite the fact that it is U.S. forces that have actually kept terrorism out of Central Asia and Russia.⁴⁹ Indeed, President Putin has previously acknowledged that fact, so this new criticism reflects both Russia's opportunism and visceral anti-Americanism, possibly at the expense of a more rational assessment of its own security needs and capabilities.⁵⁰ Apart from spotlighting the visceral anti-Americanism and residual neo-imperialist fantasies of Russian policy regarding hegemony in Central Asia, this policy also reflects Moscow and Beijing's determination to isolate the region from exposure to the West. Indeed, China strongly articulated its opposition to any such plans merely on the basis of these rumors of deployments at the first of its Foreign Minister's meetings with his Central



Asian opposite numbers in the new C+C5 (China plus the five Central Asian states - thus copying the innovation of the US Secretary of State with his Central Asian counterparts).⁵¹

Because of the worsening situation in Afghanistan and probably to head off any extended American presence there and in Central Asia China has now felt impelled to announce its criteria for peace in Afghanistan. On June 3, 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in a conference with his Pakistani and Afghani counterparts, outlined China's five-point peace program and admitted that as foreign forces exist Afghanistan terrorist and other conflicts are growing. China clearly aims her to increase its presence and exclude that of Washington if not other foreign actors. Therefore, the first point is that the Afghan process be an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process whereby all parties in Afghanistan jointly build an inclusive political structure.⁵² This means a weak government with pro-Chinese elements but also no U.S. presence. Secondly, the negotiating process with the Taliban in Doha must continue and lead to the third point, i.e., the Taliban's inclusion in a new government that could facilitate the fourth point of international and regional support for an orderly withdrawal of U.S. troops, and fifth a strengthening of trilateral cooperation among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China.⁵³ Apart from enhancing Chinese leverage on Afghanistan, either directly or indirectly through Pakistan Beijing's objectives are quite transparent here.

China's activities in Central Asia and specifically Afghanistan, as elsewhere, betoken an increasingly aggressive foreign and defense policy. Apart from the US-Japanese efforts to offer a counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative in the form of the Blue Dot Network (BDN) that began under the Trump Administration and that is discussed below, we see other manifestations of Chinese moves for a hegemonic position in Central Asia. Increasingly apprehensive of its future with the U.S. withdrawal Kabul had no choice in this trilateral ministerial meeting but to support of the BRI, its



specific Pakistani component, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and to proclaim its reliance upon exports and imports to and from the port of Gwadar. Thus, China is thus coming to terms with Washington's withdrawal even though on the one hand it would like to see the U.S. continue to be bogged down in Afghanistan and also oblige the U.S. to confront the problem of Islamic radicalism rather than have to confront that problem on its own.⁵⁴ On the other hand, because it now has to have a policy for a post-American Afghanistan China will now endeavor to strengthen its economic leverage upon Kabul.⁵⁵ Yet Beijing still suspects that Washington will not fully leave Afghanistan and strive to retain a leading position there.⁵⁶ Finally China also has apparently come to expect that instability in Afghanistan is the most likely outcome even if the Afghan government and the Taliban reached an accord. So, it is clearly ready to live with the necessity of either acting on its own or with and/or through Pakistan.⁵⁷

At the same time, Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan will also grow commensurately even if Washington continues to call the BRI and example of predatory economic policy.⁵⁸ Moreover its objectives in Afghanistan are consonant with China's objectives so they are likely to cooperate together in Afghanistan against the U.S. and India.⁵⁹ And beyond the BRI and the new bases it appears that Chinese intelligence agents were caught trying to organize in Afghanistan an artificial Uighur cell to draw in militant Uighurs of concern to China who resided in Afghanistan.⁶⁰ These activities betray a pattern of China's increasing willingness to act unilaterally, i.e. not rely on Russia, to pursue its Central Asian objectives and to do so more high-handedly than before. This pattern can only raise anxieties not only in local governments and Washington but also in New Delhi, and likely Moscow.⁶¹

For its part and despite reports saying it had agreed to host CIA bases in Pakistan, Islamabad also has refused Washington's entreaties.⁶² We can cite three factors for this refusal.



First, the consistency with which Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan has vociferously opposed his country's past dealings with Washington has left little room for his government to acquiesce to U.S. requests. Before coming into power, Khan was a staunch critic of U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan, even launching a campaign against them.

Second, Pakistan aiding the United States in its efforts to keep an eye on the Taliban would likely vitiate the country's ties with the powerful Afghan group. Pakistan can ill-afford to attenuate its relationship with the Taliban because it is becoming abundantly clear that they are the most dominant player in the Afghan political landscape.

Having already warned Afghanistan's neighbors against making the historic mistake of allowing the U.S. to operate military bases, the Taliban would certainly not welcome Pakistan taking such a step. They could accuse Pakistan of wilting under U.S. pressure.

Third, Pakistan allowing the U.S. to use military bases for carrying out combat missions will likely be a cause of concern for two of Pakistan's neighbors: China and Iran. That both countries are adversaries of the United States is all the more troubling. Washington has termed Beijing the biggest threat to U.S. national security. Coupled with the U.S. aversion to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), this means that should Pakistan allow U.S. forces to operate out of its territory, Washington would almost certainly use that advantage to keep tabs on CPEC, which is expected to expand and gain momentum. Both Pakistan and China would not like to see the U.S. physically lurking around CPEC hotspots, including the critical Gwadar port.⁶³

Thus, Washington probably has no way to preserve a military footprint in Central Asia other than acquiring base in a Central Asian state. That situation should, of its own accord, bring home to policymakers the need for a multi-dimensional and balanced Central Asian policy that does not emphasize Afghanistan at every other actor's expense. This rivalry among interested parties in Afghanistan suggests the pattern of things to come in Central Asia at least in relation to Afghan issues. While it will be largely an Asian competition for influence among warring Afghan factions, the U.S. will, if it does engage substantially, do so on behalf of or with one or another Asian government, not excluding Central Asian states, and it will be in a much freer position than before to exercise whatever leverage it deems necessary as a result of that stance.⁶⁴ But if the U.S. decides to commit itself in Central Asia in this manner, it will need to do something new, namely to forge a Central Asian strategy that is genuinely based on Central Asian realities transcending Afghanistan's crisis. This hardly means ignoring Afghanistan. Rather it entails enhanced attention to the real processes occurring across Central Asian states and a clearer assessment of their importance for U.S. interests. The Trump



Administration's Central Asia strategy sought to get away from this preoccupation with Afghanistan at the expense of the rest of the region. But it ran out of time and was still too consumed by Afghanistan. However, the departure of forces from Afghanistan now affords the U.S. the chance to devise and execute a truly regional, multi-faceted Central Asian strategy.⁶⁵

Thus, the Biden Administration now possesses the opportunity to develop a genuine Central Asian strategy even though it is clear to all that the region has not been and is unlikely to become a priority region of U.S. foreign policy. But for that to happen Washington must realize that Central Asia as a region in its own right deserves serious consideration. The argument that we are withdrawing from Afghanistan in order to engage China betrays a lack of vision concerning Central Asia.⁶⁶ Arguably an administration that wants to engage China needs to upgrade its profile in Central Asia which is now a priority area for China.

China may strongly oppose new or different American bases in Central Asia but it is apparently troubled by the prospect of what it expects to be a vacuum in Afghanistan should the U.S. leave. Therefore, and in conformity to the logic of its current military moves into Central Asia, huge investments in the BRI, and anxiety over terrorism adjacent to Xinjiang despite its genocidal campaign there, China is evidently considering sending peacekeepers into Afghanistan once U.S. forces leave.⁶⁷ If China does actually dispatch forces to Afghanistan not only will it be making a qualitative enhancement of its military forces there, it will also not sit well with other Central Asian states and India. But should this become Chinese policy it will also testify to the absence of strategic thinking in Washington about the need for a substantial U.S. multi-domain, i.e., not just military, presence in Central Asia in order to counter what would amount to an attempted Chinese power grab there.



Although the U.S. insists it is not leaving Afghanistan to its fate and will support its interests and friends there, it is clear that few external observers believe this and the Taliban will almost certainly act to make sure that the American presence in Afghanistan is removed by force.⁶⁸ So while the U.S. is withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan it must not only determine ways of saving its domestic partners and allies therefrom an inevitable Taliban retribution, it also must see to it that a negotiated settlement entailing power sharing lasts for a long time and stops Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan. Absent U.S. forces this policy can only work if Washington has credible regional partners if not allies. Therefore, it is essential from Washington's standpoint not just that new bases be found, but that the decision for them be part of a broader economic-military-political strategy for advancing U.S. and Central Asian interests together. Otherwise, Washington will neither be able to defend its interests and partners in Afghanistan nor offer credible support for the security of Central Asian governments. Then those governments will have no choice but to look elsewhere for Security against what they perceive to be a terrorist threat emerging out of the vacuum of power in Afghanistan.

Local Governments

As it stands, there is already no lack of governments willing to enter into the breach caused by the American withdrawal. We have already cited the possibility of China assuming a larger military role to safeguard its vital interests. But it will hardly be alone in doing so. As we have seen, Russia is playing all the angles in Afghanistan. But not only are the great powers active here, Central Asian states, particularly Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are also trying to shore up their security against the expected ruins in Afghanistan. For example, there have been eight joint exercises among regional militaries since 2011 and more will follow.⁶⁹



Uzbekistan's programs encompass assistance and cooperation with Afghanistan in major economic and infrastructural projects and also, major cooperation with Tajikistan. It clearly is animated by a version of its interests being enhanced by regional cooperation in a fundamental change from the policies of President Islam Karimov who died in 2016.⁷⁰ This vision of regional cooperation entails helping Tajikistan who will be a front-line state once the expected fall of the Afghan government takes place. Tashkent's assistance to Dushanbe also allows the Tajik government to gain some breathing room for maneuver between Moscow and Beijing on the one hand and its Central Asian neighbors. As a result of talks between Tajik President Rahmon and Uzbek President Mirziyoyev in June, 2021, 36 cooperation agreements were signed allowing Tajikistan to replace Chinese imports with Uzbek ones.⁷¹ In addition the two states agreed to build two hydroelectric power plants on Tajikistan's side of the Zarafsahan river, marking a fundamental turnaround for the years-long rivalry over Tajikistan's Rogun dam.⁷² In fact the two sides agreed to trade deals amounting to 1 Billion and one report observed that if reality meets with the expectations generated by these deals, Tajik-Uzbek trade will surpass Tajikistan's trade with Russia.⁷³ Moreover, Mirziyoyev's visit was received with jubilation.⁷⁴

Uzbekistani cooperation with Afghanistan is an equal part of this policy. Indeed, due to decisions taken during Karimov's rule to prioritize relations with Central Asia, it is a necessity

Given the circumstances, declaring Central Asia as a priority region and using diplomacy remains the only viable option. The looming withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the uncertainty it brings leaves Tashkent with no other option but to establish working relations with Kabul. It is reflected in Uzbekistan's tireless attempts to build a dialogue with the current administration of Ashraf Ghani as well as the Taliban. It is also clear that Uzbekistan puts enormous resources at the forefront of solving the Afghan peace puzzle.⁷⁵

Exemplifying such cooperation is the new Afghan consulate in Termez that will help develop joint projects and attract investment.⁷⁶ Mirziyoyev also attaches high hopes to a planned Afghan-Pakistani railway that will also connect with railroads in Central Asia and give land-locked Uzbekistan access to



seaports, i.e. Gwadar on the Indian Ocean.⁷⁷ Yet at the same time Uzbekistan maintains contact to Uzbek militias in Northern Afghanistan and simultaneously negotiating with the Taliban.⁷⁸

Kazakhstan, if anything, preceded Uzbekistan into this broader regional consciousness and has brilliantly succeeded in its multi-vector policy. At the same time as Kazakh and Chinese leaders are hailing their ‘strategic partnership’, Kazakhstan is going to increase cooperation with the U.S on drug smuggling and terrorism after the pullout from Afghanistan.⁷⁹ Its leadership has stated that there will not be a U.S. base there but it is continuing cooperation “in such strategic spheres as energy, investments, technologies,” according to President Tokayev.⁸⁰ Environmental cooperation that will greatly benefit Kazakhstan is another area of potential and expanded cooperation with the U.S.⁸¹ At the same time Kazakhstan promptly shot down Russian ideas about counter-sanctions on the West through the Eurasian Economic Union, Moscow’s hoped for instrument of economic-political reintegration of Central Asia with Russia, thereby demonstrating its independence and refusal to be trapped into anything resembling an alliance.⁸²

Finally, Kazakhstan too offers support to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, not to mention Afghanistan.

Examples of support for Kazakhstan are as follows;

One noteworthy cause is the education of Afghan women. Thanks to a 2 million euro program launched in 2019 by the European Union, United Nations Development Program, and Kazakhstan, some 50 Afghan women are studying in Kazakh (and Uzbek) universities. The first group of 20 is scheduled to graduate this summer. This number includes 10 women who are currently studying at AlmaU language school; afterward “they will continue their education at the Kazakh-British Technical University (KBTU) and study technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs in mining,” according to Kazakh authorities. Many other Afghan nationals have also moved to Kazakhstan to pursue studies. As for the defense sector, a cooperation agreement between the two governments was signed this month between Afghan National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib and Kazakh Defense Minister Nurlan Yermekbayev in Nur-Sultan. The document will pave “the way for military-to-military mutual support across various domains,” according to a June 18 statement by Afghanistan’s Office of the National Security Council (NSC), and involves the possibility of “joint exercises, military



medicine cooperation, equipment modernization, logistical and technical support, battle training and military intelligence collaboration between the two nations,”⁸³

Similarly, it has just signed a deal with Tajikistan to produce cars and buses via joint ventures and offer help in agriculture.⁸⁴

Turning to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan we find a rather different reality. Tajikistan is almost a narco-state and a family-owned business, whose business is corruption.⁸⁵ Kyrgyzstan is subject to endemic instability and the rise of criminalized clan politics.⁸⁶ As a result they have both become extraordinarily vulnerable to foreign pressure and depend increasingly on the kindness of strangers. Kyrgyzstan has apparently fallen into a debt trap with China as a result of loans from Chinese banks and the impact of the current pandemic that led to a 9% drop in GDP in 2020. It thus risks losing control of its mining fields to China.⁸⁷ Apart from the compelling need to obtain foreign resources from Moscow and Beijing if not other actors, they have now engaged in repeated border clashes during 2021. Consequently, they are now both soliciting weapons and other military materiel from Russia, China, and even Turkey.⁸⁸ Worse yet, China has already “revised” the border with Tajikistan to its advantage and may be thinking of doing so again as some Chinese media now write that “Tajikistan’s territory was China’s land in the past.”⁸⁹ Similarly, Putin is strengthening the Tajik armed forces base it shares with the Russian military base in Tajikistan, another example of its dependence on Russia and China.⁹⁰

These countries’ weakness obviously makes them dependent upon other actors, especially Russia and China. But while Russia is trying to play all sides against the middle in Afghanistan and China seems ready to hedge against all possible outcomes, given their relationship that has, according to both governments reached unprecedented heights if not an alliance, what are the prospects of their further joint action in the wake of the U.S./NATO departure from Afghanistan?⁹¹



The Russo-Chinese Alliance

Although many observers, if not most, deny that Russia and China are de facto (as opposed to de jure) allies, officials in many governments and the evidence suggests otherwise.⁹² Actually Russo-Chinese experts, if not officials concluded some time ago that their relations are better than those of allies because they are free to act as they choose.⁹³ At the same time we cannot overlook the fact that there are strains in the relationship, the most important one being the vast economic asymmetry between these two colossi. That asymmetry, as shown below leads China to encroach upon Russian commercial interests in Central Asia. Nevertheless, in regard to the crisis around Afghanistan not only are the two states in conformity with each other, the intensifying Russian rapprochement with Pakistan – undoubtedly facilitated by China – entails substantial mutual coordination among these governments.⁹⁴

Thus, China and Russia would both countenance an interim government in Afghanistan composed of both members of the existing government and the Taliban on condition that they bottle up Islamic terrorists and do not permit them to use Afghanistan as a base for future attacks abroad.⁹⁵ Neither leadership wants to see more strife in Central Asia given their substantial investments there. Moreover, they are not going to challenge each other's redlines though China will undoubtedly maximize its economic-political presence and probably increase its military exposure even if there is no expansion of Afghan violence beyond its borders. As Nadege Rolland wrote in 2019 they both seek a condominium over the region to exclude as much as possible American or other presences.⁹⁶ But that will not stop China in the middle to long-term from further encroachments as Chinese experts firmly believe that due to the economic asymmetry between their capabilities Russia will be powerless to stop the expansion of China's influence here.⁹⁷ Thus over the long term we will see challenges to the aforementioned "division of labor" between Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia. But we will not see



support for democratization or efforts to interfere unduly with internal governance in any state lest it be on the verge of falling apart. For these reasons, opposition to terrorism; the U.S. and democracy, we can expect Russia and China to collaborate together for a long time to come as we are now seeing with regard to Afghanistan and on overall regional policies.

Conclusion

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan represents another turn of the wheel in the increasingly complex and many-sided international rivalries in Central Asia. While this is undoubtedly a great game it is hardly the older Kiplingesque version. All the European powers have been extruded and this may happen as well to the U.S. if it cannot devise and execute a countervailing strategy and embody it in policies that meet the real needs of Central Asia, which are largely not military needs. As for Afghanistan, undoubtedly all the interested Asian actors, as we have shown, are acting or intervening there to secure their objectives. But unless perpetual conflict is their main goal, due to the long-standing inability of Afghans to form a viable state, they may have to be satisfied with keeping what is likely to be another civil war going lest their rival, be it India, the U.S., Islamic terrorists, or another one of their own midst gain undue pre-eminence there. Admittedly this is a sobering forecast but unless Afghans can unite on building a coherent and internally peaceful state Afghanistan will forever be at the mercy of one or another external actor who will feel impelled to defy the fact that Afghanistan remains the graveyard of empires. Moreover, Central Asia is much greater than Afghanistan, the real game, as suggested above, is to be won with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. A wise policy will focus on the economic-political betterment of ties with Central Asian states and cooperation with either or both of



these regional leaders rather than chasing after the will of the wisp of victory in Afghanistan. But given the makeup of the leading contenders from outside Central Asia for some form of hegemony there we cannot be sure they will fully grasp this point and proceed wisely rather than self-interestedly. For, as experts know, the relationships here are intrinsically complex and multi-faceted. They demand and require cooperation not conflict. But for the foreseeable future rivalry and conflict will apparently be the order of the day. Just as we invoked the shade of Matthew Arnold above in warning of perpetual rivalry and conflict here, should these rivalries and wars in Afghanistan continue, it might also be politic to invoke the shade of Shelley’s dictator Ozymandias, who ultimately beckons us to “look on my work ye mortals and despair.”

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## Notes

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