

**“The Events in Afghanistan 2021: Impact on Security in Central Asia”**

*Subtopic: “The Taliban will make a state, not war. So not much will change for Central Asia”*

**Introduction**

This summer, Central Asia returned to the international headlines. Not for the Tajik-Kyrgyz border clashes, not for the elections in Uzbekistan, and not for the poor management of the pandemic. It was for Afghanistan and the Taliban’s resurgence to power in Kabul. But what made it worldwide news – the bloody coups and conflicts in Myanmar, Ethiopia or Sudan gained little public attention compared to Afghanistan – was the herein eminent failure of U.S. foreign policy. It turned out to be Washington’s biggest miscalculation since Vietnam: 20 years, more than 2 trillion USD spent by the US alone,<sup>1</sup> and more than 220,000 war deaths<sup>2</sup>. Beyond chilling headlines and America’s retreat from the region, however, it does not have as much of an impact on wider Central Asian security as one may think (or fear).

What does this mean for Central Asia – now that the Americans went home and some of their equipment fell into the hands of the Taliban? Terrorist threats spilling over and drug-trafficking from Afghanistan have been framing Central Asia security discourse from the very beginning. The main argument of this essay, however, is that the Taliban takeover won’t change much. At least, not for the worse (except for those living directly under the new Taliban regime, the Afghan people). In the first step, therefore, we will look at how the security situation for the Central Asia has been *before* and *after* the Taliban takeover. In the second part, we will put the new Afghan leadership in perspective of the broader international security dynamics – which are more important for the Central Asian five, given the Sino-American conflict and Russia’s place in it.

**Background**

But first, what happened so far? A lot has been said and written about the threat of terrorism and radical Islam, before 9/11 and especially afterwards. Before, mostly in the Eastern hemisphere: Russia’s fight against separatism and terrorist attacks in its Northern Caucasus region earned little empathy in the West, rather criticism for bombing the insurgency into submission with two brutal wars in Chechnya. One of the most notorious faces of the Caucasian jihad, Shamil Basayev, had been trained in Central Asia, earning him the nickname ‘Russia’s Osama Bin Laden’. Yet some observers today, and then, believe in a conspiracy: that the secret services staged the bombing attacks on apartment house buildings in the European part of Russia, for fabricating public support for the second Chechen war and lifting the FSB agent Putin onto the throne in the Kremlin.

Much of this seems astonishingly reminiscent of post-9/11 conspiracy theories, although the details that came to light in contemporary Russian media investigations still raise questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Crawford 2021, 14–15. Additionally, the Washington will need to spend an estimated one trillion US-Dollar for veteran care and additional costs by 2050.

<sup>2</sup> Crawford and Lutz 2019, 1

Whatever happened in Russia in the 1990s, however, Central Asia and the rest of the world entered a new era only after Al Qaeda managed the most successful PR stunt of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the world watched the victims of jihadism jumping out of the windows of the World Trade Center in New York, just before the skyscrapers imploded in fire and dust.<sup>3</sup>

The rest is history: Moscow was the first to plead its allegiance to Washington, hoping for an equal partnership in the ‘war against terror’. The Kremlin helped the US-led forces to facilitate military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan for the invasion in Afghanistan (the Taliban were believed to host Al Qaeda). But unity was to falter soon. The relationship between Russia and NATO became frosty, hitting its first low with Putin’s infamous Munich speech in 2007, in which he accused Washington of unilateralism and NATO expansion, followed by the Russo-Georgian war one year later. Since then, Moscow opposed American military bases in Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, the regime decided to expel the Americans, for Washington had begun raising concerns loudly over Uzbekistan’s human rights record.

### **Argument: Afghanistan changed less than we think – but the global balance did**

This summer, after exactly 20 years, America hastily left the country – obviously worried she could not protect her own soldiers in an orderly but slow-moving withdrawal. The images embarrassed not only Washington, but also its allies in Europe who were equally unprepared for the advancement of the Taliban. Military forces, aid programs and journalists alike raged over the treatment of their local Afghan aides who could not leave the country and had to fear the vengeance of the approaching Taliban fighters. Meanwhile, the citizens of Kabul rushed to shut down or paint over shops, windows and institutions that expressed any signs of Western liberalism. CNN reporter Clarissa Ward became a sad symbol for the arrival of the Islamists: from one day to the next she appeared veiled in a black hijab on TV, and soon she had to leave for Pakistan for security reasons. More emotionally laden has been the video footage of desperate Afghans falling from military airplanes taking off from Kabul airport, and of mothers throwing their babies over razor wire to save them.

### **The Taliban have always *de facto* controlled Afghanistan**

Since then, the headlines have shifted somewhere else. For Afghanistan’s Central Asian neighbors, as stated above, nothing has changed drastically, and it won’t in the future – at least not for the worse. The previous security threats remain in place; but they are not new as they have been very well known for decades by now. Thus, the regional governments already have expertise and mechanisms to deal with these issues. The problems are not to disappear from the agenda unless there is a cooperative government in Kabul which effectively controls the whole territory of Afghanistan. History, however, has shown that this mountainous country, with its tribal structures, is nearly uncontrollable. All foreign invaders have had to learn this the hard way. But there is one power that proved to be a permanent factor: the Taliban. Since their ousting from power in 2001, the allied forces and their Afghan protégés failed to push them out of the country or shatter their structures. Once again, Washington alone (not to mention its other partners and international programs) poured more than 2 trillion USD into this endeavor – that’s more than President Biden’s national infrastructure bill will cost.<sup>4</sup> In spite of this financial and military superiority, the Taliban managed to establish control over large swathes of Afghanistan. The swift takeover this summer

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<sup>3</sup> Often forgotten, however, are the two other airplanes: one hitting the Pentagon, another crashing without reaching its target in Washington.

<sup>4</sup> The New York Times 2021

eventually laid bare the Potemkin construct that the national Afghan government was. It should not have come to such a surprise: the German forces, for example, had been ridiculed at home for years for ‘guarding’ the opium fields that blossomed in front of their eyes.

In terms of opium production, statistics indicate that foreign interventions only boosted the problem. After the Soviet invasion, the number of poppy fields increased drastically as the mujahideen needed money for weapons; and so again when the international coalition invaded in 2001. In 2000, opium poppy grew across 82,000 hectares, increasing to 131,000 hectares by 2004. Afghanistan thus has been the world’s top opium supplier, with a share of 80%. It hit record with 330,000 hectares in 2017 (by 2020, it had decreased to 224,000 hectares again).<sup>5</sup> It goes without saying that most of it was grown in the Taliban controlled southern provinces.

These realities have been illustrated by the Kazakh operation “Tornado”, which liquidated a drug trafficking network active in Kazakhstan, Italy and China.<sup>6</sup> The Kazakh agents observed the difference between the Uzbek and Afghan border posts: without any military uniforms but equipped with Kalashnikovs, the Afghan authorities “looked like mujahideen fighters”; the border guard chief drove a Maserati sports car.<sup>7</sup> When they met with their Afghan counterparts, the Kazakh security officials observed the constant alert and readiness for terrorist attacks, because the government controlled urban settlements only – the intercity highways, however, were in the hands of the Taliban. When the Afghan Ministry for Internal Affairs learned that the operatives needed to meet with drug dealers on Taliban controlled soil, it almost backed out of the Kazakh operation.

### **Only one thing changed: the Taliban are about to make a *state* now**

Since the Taliban also conquered the capital, only one thing has changed: there is no formidable military force to oppose them anymore whilst the Taliban claim to be the official government of the Afghan state. With former state officials having fled and assets frozen, the Taliban now need to meet the challenge of establishing effective state structures – asserting a monopoly of legitimate force within state borders, creating a public administration, and achieving recognition by the international community.

As Andrey Kazantsev, analyst for the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), sketched out, there are currently two scenarios with good and bad implications for Central Asia (and Russia):<sup>8</sup> A *strong Taliban* rule is good if it is controlled by the moderate wing with an all-inclusive government and international terrorists expelled from Afghan soil; if the radical wing sets the course, however, expansionism and external aggression is likely. A *weak Taliban* implies an economic crisis and conflict over resources, ensuing fragmentation and civil war in the country, and ethnic conflicts especially in the Panjshir valley. The only good option in this latter scenario would be one in which no external power gets drawn in this intra-Afghan war; enclaves controlled by forces benign to Russia and the Central Asian neighbors would balance the ones seized by international terrorist organizations, and border security challenges remain localized. The even worse option would be that external powers get involved in proxy wars like in Syria and Libya, and regional and transnational Islamist movements gain momentum with organizations such as IS mobilizing.

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<sup>5</sup> Broll 2013; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2021

<sup>6</sup> Комитет национальной безопасности Республики Казахстан 2021

<sup>7</sup> Комитет национальной безопасности Республики Казахстан 2021

<sup>8</sup> Kazantsev 2021

Facing these scenarios, it becomes apparent that only a strong Taliban is valuable for Central Asian security. A weak Taliban is most likely to escalate an intra-country struggle into a wider proxy conflict, given the activities of IS and the porous borders with Central Asia – which would endanger Russia and China with its notoriously securitized Xinjiang Uighur region. Hence, a complex web of conflicts would be to emerge along ethnic and religious lines: anti-Shia groups (IS) countered by Iran’s support for Shia Muslims; Central Asian terrorist groups fought by their governments, for example, the Islamic Movement Uzbekistan; Tajik and Uzbek diasporas dragging in their protectors; Pakistan’s support for the Pashtun diaspora; and India probably seeking to squash Pakistan’s influence, potentially supporting Tajiks and Pashtun movements seeking autonomy from Islamabad.<sup>9</sup>

After all, Afghan neighbors are interested in a stable Afghanistan and controlled risk analysis. As the Taliban are the only force which can potentially establish long-term control, there is no alternative (the idea of stabilizing the country by direct invasion and a puppet regime should be from the table for all time). Russia’s strategy of siding with the most powerful fractions and strongmen for the sake of stability has proven successful in Syria and on its own territory, where the Kremlin tolerates the autonomous rule of the Kadyrov clan in Chechnya, with turning a blind eye to severe human rights violations.<sup>10</sup> China apparently shares the same approach, as reflected by its oppression of Uighurs in Xinjiang and campaign against ‘the three evils’ (separatism, terrorism, extremism) through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).<sup>11</sup>

That a strong Taliban adopts an aggressive foreign policy seems highly unlikely, given the situation they put themselves in: they want to become a state with all its necessities and conditions. And here we turn back to the poppy fields, the main source of the Taliban’s war budget. To make a state, they will need to diversify their financial sources, and this makes them dependent on other states and neighbors. They cannot afford an aggressive foreign policy, since they lack the budget to fight on the home front *and* its powerful neighbors. The revenues from opium do not suffice to maintain state structures. Furthermore, the autocratic regime will need to redistribute resources within its patronage to keep political loyalties and the security forces running. And if they do not succeed in that, the scenario of a weak and divided Taliban with an ensuing civil war seems inevitable. Hence the Taliban cannot but keep to their promise to refrain from hostile actions and hosting international terrorist structures – or at least try so.

This dependence on basic trade gives the Central Asian states leverage over them: we cooperate and trade with you, but you keep the terrorists and opium away from our borders. Of course, this is more complex and depends heavily on the Taliban’s power base at home. But it makes an increase in security risks under the Taliban less likely. Also, the Taliban wish to become a theocracy and internationally recognized state, probably comparable to Iran. This gives the secular though basically Muslim countries of Central Asia (and everyone else) a normative instrument: the production and consumption of drugs is forbidden by Islamic law, a rule of which a Talib theocracy shall be reminded of if it chooses to build its state budget on seducing the world for the sin of heroin.

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<sup>9</sup> Kazantsev 2021

<sup>10</sup> Ostermeier 2020

<sup>11</sup> Cooley 2012, 74–97

And here we are touching upon the issue of international recognition. First of all, in the short run, it does not really matter. As stated above, the Taliban have always been *de facto* in control of the country's destiny, and now they are undeniably the power incumbents. Their stability is in the interest of their neighbors. Thus, their domestic policy, the oppression of people, especially women and sexual minorities, will be of lesser priority as long as no ethnic-religious conflicts break out in violence, compelling external actors to intervene on behalf of one group and thus weakening the Taliban. At the time of writing, Russia, Pakistan, China and Kazakhstan send humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and the Taliban are invited to dialogues in Moscow. China spoke further out against sanctions against Afghanistan and Russia demanded at the United Nations to unfreeze Afghanistan's assets.<sup>12</sup> Kazakhstan agreed with the Taliban on a student exchange program for Afghan students back in early October.<sup>13</sup> Uzbekistan is interested in keeping up its export surplus to Afghanistan and stick to infrastructure projects such as railways; Tashkent furthermore hopes to reach the Pakistani ports of Karachi and Gwadar.<sup>14</sup> But apart from Tajikistan, all neighbors are keen on keeping Afghan refugees out of the country.<sup>15</sup>

*De facto* the Taliban are already recognized by these countries (although domestically forbidden as a terrorist organization). From now on, it only depends on how cordially Kabul behaves whether or not the recognition will be formalized. Probably, this will take years, especially if Western democracies resist and have little interest given geographic distance and low economic prospects. But for day-to-day business, *de facto* recognition as power incumbent and dialogue partner is what counts. A most recent example is the refugee crisis on the EU's eastern border, provoked by Belarus' Alexander Lukashenko. Though formerly not recognized as 'President' and referred to as 'Mr Lukashenko', German chancellor Angela Merkel had no other choice than to negotiate with him – rendering the issue of recognition semantics.<sup>16</sup> It cannot be expected that Russia, China and the Central Asian states will stick to such semantics for long, which would only complicate matters further. The Taliban count on that and present themselves welcoming of foreign investments in the country's reconstruction and natural resources – and lobby for support at UN-level.<sup>17</sup> Regional economic projects under construction, such as the TAPI pipeline (carrying gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India), the regional electricity network project CASA-1000 and the China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor will help them to engage their neighbors on technical levels.<sup>18</sup> And finally, Russia's calculus is that a fierce enmity between Taliban and IS could even make the Taliban a security partner against the latter.<sup>19</sup>

## What really matters: the global power shift

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<sup>12</sup> TASS 2021a; Xin 2021; Hassan 2021; CGTN 2021; Радио Азаттык 2021

<sup>13</sup> Радио Азаттык 2021

<sup>14</sup> Gotev 2021; RFE/RL 2021a; France 24 2021; Mashrab 2021a; Nuriddinov 2021

<sup>15</sup> CABAR.asia 2021

<sup>16</sup> Kurmayer 2021

<sup>17</sup> TASS 2021c

<sup>18</sup> Hassan 2021; TASS 2021b; The Express Tribune 2021; Khan, Changgang, and Afzaal 2020

<sup>19</sup> Eurasianet 2021

What really matters for Central Asian security though, is the global power shift, of which the events in Afghanistan are only one symptom out of many.<sup>20</sup> As described in the introduction, Moscow soon changed its mind on US-American military bases in its ‘near abroad’. But China as well views American military presence in its direct neighborhood as a thorn in the side. With the final withdrawal this summer, Moscow clearly opposed the idea of a transfer of American troops to another Central Asian country.<sup>21</sup> Almost simultaneously, tensions between Beijing and Washington over the South China Sea, and Taiwan in particular, increased, with Washington forming a new military alliance, AUKUS, which is obviously part of a larger containment strategy against China. At the same time, NATO is developing a dual containment strategy that views China and Russia as a unified threat.<sup>22</sup> This fuels further Russo-Chinese coordination and military operability exercises and might result in a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>23</sup>

In this light, the real change – though not a drastic one – for the states between the Caspian Sea, Xinjiang and Siberia is, that the American chapter in Central Asia is closed. Russia and China will not allow an American presence anymore. The Taliban takeover breathed new life into the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). For years, the alliance (and the Russian military base in Tajikistan) had been lacking a clear purpose in absence of an external threat.<sup>24</sup> Military drills and exercise at the Tajik and Uzbek borders were mobilized quickly (one Russo-Uzbek training, a Russo-Uzbek-Tajik exercise, and CSTO drills in Tajikistan).<sup>25</sup> Even Uzbekistan’s ‘suspended’ membership caught some wind (although this might disappear from the agenda again if Afghanistan stabilizes and the Taliban government turns out to be a reliable neighbor).<sup>26</sup> In the case of attacks or invasion of a CSTO member from Afghanistan, the mutual defense clause would be triggered – posing the crucial moment in which Moscow needs to show whether it is able and willing to fill its role as a regional protector.

Among the pragmatic post-Soviet states, Tajikistan has taken an outsider role. Highlighted are its ethnic ties to Afghanistan – approximately 20% of the Afghan population are Tajiks (98% in the Panjshir area). Some say this is the reason why Dushanbe took a tough stance on the Taliban, that Dushanbe suspects the Taliban have changed little since the 1990s. Others, however, allude to the fact that illicit drug trade from Afghanistan makes up for an estimated third of Tajikistan’s economy, benefitting corrupt officials who have vested interests in keeping the flow. Tajikistan also acts from pure self-interest, fearing Islamist spill overs and refugees seeking shelter. The crisis could rather be seen as a chance taken by the Rahmon regime to distract the Tajik population and international community from domestic deficits – and secure financial support from the EU.<sup>27</sup> Either way, here comes China into play again. Beijing already secured its small border with Afghanistan, so that no terrorist groups or

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<sup>20</sup> For a broader perspective on the demise of liberal order, see Cooley and Nexon 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Putz 2021

<sup>22</sup> Khalaf and Foy 2021

<sup>23</sup> Rasheed 2021; For a study on the institutionalization of Russo-Chinese military cooperation, see Korolev 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Krivosheev 2021; Schulz 2021; Klyszcz 2021

<sup>25</sup> RFE/RL 2021b; Пресс-служба Центрального военного округа 2021a; 2021b; CSTO 2021; CSTO Press Secretary 2021; CSTO and Zas 2021; The Joint Press Center of the CSTO training "Combat Brotherhood-2021" 2021. Interestingly, the joint drills with Russian, Uzbek, Tajik, Belarusian and Kazakh units trained tactics developed in the Syrian war.

<sup>26</sup> Mashrab 2021b

<sup>27</sup> Lemon 2021; Umarov 2021

transnational criminals could cross it, but the Tajik border remains porous both on the Afghan and the Chinese side – predestining Tajikistan to become a hub for pro-Uighur terrorists and activists, the CCP fears.

Tellingly, China sponsored several border posts over the past years. And reportedly, in reaction to the Afghan coup, Beijing pledged to pay and equip a new police base for Tajik rapid response forces. It raised further questions in the context of recent leaks of a secret Chinese military base. Both Beijing and Dushanbe deny the existence – but according to the leaks, Tajik President Rahmon suggested to hand-over the base completely, waiving the rental fee in exchange for military assistance.<sup>28</sup> It hits a similar vein that the Uzbek State Committee for the Defense Industry announced to deepen military-technological cooperation with China, including weaponry and dual-use products.<sup>29</sup> In consequence, Moscow re-emerges as Central Asia's primary military security leader, but China's stake in it raise to a competitive level.

The SCO unifies all Central Asia and its surrounding stakeholders, including Pakistan, India, and Iran. Such a diplomatic platform – binding regulatory mechanisms like those of the CSTO or NATO appear improbable due to the antagonist nature of its membership – gains greater importance, the more complex the web of national self-interests, lines of conflict and security risks becomes. In the case of security threats from Afghanistan, this means that the members can coordinate and legitimize their actions taken through other institutional frameworks such as the CSTO. They could further build on and deepen the SCO's established Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) in fighting terrorist groups in targeted special operations and intelligence sharing. Afghanistan's SCO observer status, which usually precedes full membership, may help the Taliban to acquire further recognition. If the Taliban sticks to its promise to stifle drug trade and (rival) international terrorism, the option of swift targeted special operations against cells on Afghan territory, conducted by Russian, Chinese and other Central Asian forces, could be at least theoretically debated.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

So far it appears that the Taliban are at least rhetorically aware of the rules of realpolitik, and with regards to their long-term goal – building a viable state with a sound standing in international relations – they would be foolish to abandon pragmatism for an aggressive foreign policy. The Taliban do not have the power for that, and they know it. It cannot be expected that Afghanistan will develop significant economic growth in the next decades, yet it will seek to be further integrated in regional economic infrastructure. In terms of regional security and foreign policy, therefore, one might even dare an optimistic outlook: a new Afghan Emirate that is more stable than the previous Potemkin state might alter former insecurities to be more predictable, although the overall complexity increases globally.

The Central Asian states will have no other choice than continuing their pragmatic approach to a Taliban-led Afghanistan. (In the case of Tajikistan, it may be assumed that rhetorical hostilities in Dushanbe will be restrained by the other regional actors, first and foremost by Moscow, who is committed to Tajikistan's defense within the Collective Security Treaty, and China.) The Taliban's domestic challenges endow Central Asia with several bargaining chips in economy, diplomacy and military security – backed by the great powers Russia and China.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibragimova 2021; Eurasianet 2019; Standish 2021; Чоршанбиев 2021

<sup>29</sup> Газета.uz 2021

With the American retreat, however, traditional Central Asian multi-vector diplomacy is set to be overhauled by reality, tilting Central Asian governments towards something like a *dual*-vector diplomacy, putting the West far behind Moscow and Beijing. Nevertheless, organizations such as SCO and CSTO offer them platforms to articulate their interests, preferably with a unified voice, and reap flexibility between the regional great and middle powers. Through mechanisms such as RATS they can shape processes as proactive players.

Yet, this process is open-ended, with an uncertain outcome of the Sino-American rivalry. John Mearsheimer's theory of Offensive Realism predicts that China will seek regional hegemony, which will cause its neighbors to balance against it.<sup>30</sup> And as Dmitri Trenin analyses, Russia, seeks to maintain its strategic sovereignty: Moscow prefers a power equilibrium, not a Russo-Chinese alliance which dwarfs Russia.<sup>31</sup> This would imply to advise Central Asian governments to place their bets rather on Moscow than Beijing. Yet in face of uncertainty, this calculus should be kept in mind for becoming not too dependent on Beijing security-wise – but must not expressed bluntly, since this would deprive them of their present strategic flexibility.

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<sup>30</sup> Mearsheimer 2014, 360–411

<sup>31</sup> Trenin 2021



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