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Russian International
Affairs Council

Russian - Chinese Strategic Cooperation to Ensure Security in Afghanistan Following U.S. Withdrawal

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The report by RIAC and Peking University's Institute for International and Strategic Studies on Russian – Chinese cooperation in ensuring security in Afghanistan provides a general assessment of the security situation in the country following the withdrawal of U.S. forces in August 2021. This report highlights Moscow and Beijing's interests in supporting stability in Afghanistan, as well as the means of ensuring and protecting it. The authors analyze in detail the opportunities and challenges that arise for Russia and China when cooperating in this region, as well as the impact of the U.S. and other external factors on Afghanistan.

The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of RIAC.

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Summary

Today's Afghanistan faces several security challenges. More than 20 terrorist groups are present in the country, ISIS-Khorasan* being the most active. The peculiarity of the situation in Afghanistan is that the Taliban* has yet to sever ties with several terrorist organizations, including Al Qaeda*. Another security problem in Afghanistan surrounds the activities of anti-Taliban opposition groups. An equally dangerous challenge to Afghanistan's security is the contradictory nature of the Taliban* itself. As this report will point out, the ability of the Taliban* to maintain unity within its leadership will impact the entire security situation of the country. In addition to Afghan's drug trafficking problem, Russia is deeply concerned about possible instability escaping Afghanistan's borders and bleeding into Central Asian nations. China, on the other hand, particularly fears the impact of Afghan-related issues on the Uygur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang.

When discussing the external challenges posed to Afghanistan, it is worth noting that not a single state officially recognized the new Afghan government. Internationally recognizing the Taliban* government is problematic, given that many actions of this government are at odds with many UN principles, as well as its ethical and legal norms. At the same time, certain nations maintain high-level contacts with the Taliban* government. Russia and China should support a region-wide approach to building relations with Afghanistan.

As for the role of other external players, U.S. influence in the region has declined, opening a new window of opportunity for Russia and China to strengthen their positions in the region. Meanwhile, following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the influence of other players like Pakistan, Qatar, Iran and Turkey has increased. Russia and China should take into account the impact of external factors on Afghanistan when engaging with the Taliban* government (see above).

* This organization is banned in Russia.

Introduction

After two decades of being subjugated to a foreign presence and fierce guerrilla warfare, the hasty and poorly organized withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan led to the Taliban's* return to power, provoking vigorous discussions between experts in the international community. In the late summer to early fall of 2021, scenarios for possible crisis development both in Afghanistan itself and around it varied; experts formulated both ostentatiously optimistic and extremely pessimistic forecasts for the near- and medium-term future.

Optimists hoped that the West's withdrawal from Afghanistan would provide new opportunities for enhancing security and stability in the war-torn country, as well as in neighboring states. The proponents of this viewpoint pointed out that the Taliban* had changed dramatically in last two decades and that it now has a new generation of leaders who were focused on social and economic development. They also noted that Afghanistan today is different from what it was at the end of the 20th century, when the Taliban* first came to power: the socio-demographic structure of Afghan society has changed, the proportion of the urban population has greatly increased, the average level of education has risen, etc. This may lead to neighboring countries expressing interest in Afghanistan's sustainable progressive development, and therefore aid the new Afghan leadership in integrating the country through bilateral and multilateral forms of cooperation.

If change meant a departure from the Islamic fundamentalist values, pessimists, on the other hand, assumed that the Taliban* had not changed over the past 20 years, and could never. Therefore, one should forget about any inclusive Kabul government. Drying out existing international humanitarian aid channels to Afghanistan was argued to inevitably lead to a nationwide humanitarian disaster involving food, fuel, and medicine shortages, financial collapse, and the decay of urban social infrastructure. The humanitarian catastrophe, in turn, would trigger multimillion refugee flows from Afghan, which would overwhelm neighboring states and affect not only the regions of South Asia and the Middle East, but also remote European states. Additionally, numerous difficulties were predicted to arise between the new political regime in Kabul and its surrounding states such as Tajikistan, Iran and even Pakistan. This, as well as the probable "overflow" of destructive Islamic-fundamentalist energy across Afghanistan's borders, would bring seriously negative consequences for neighboring states.

The preliminary results of the Taliban's* first year in power has, to a certain degree, confirmed the predictions of optimists and pessimists alike. The Taliban* is still the Taliban*: they are far from being converted into secular technocrats or Western-style managers. However, that is not to say that they have no desire and ability to make rational and informed decisions on specific economic and social issues. The new government has yet to become truly inclusive in ethical, sectarian or gender terms, but the Taliban* managed to consolidate their

* This organization is banned in Russia.

power in Afghanistan and there is no other real opposing political or military faction in Afghanistan that can seriously challenge them at this moment in time. Afghanistan's socioeconomic problems remain very acute, and some of them may even worsen, but a full-scale humanitarian catastrophe in the country has still not occurred this past year, nor has there been a mass exodus of the Afghan population to neighboring countries.

Naturally, predictions pertaining to Afghanistan's more bright or bleak future scenario is still up for debate. And while the future of this nation depends primarily on Afghans themselves, neighboring states can also play an important role in this respect. For obvious reasons, they have refrained from full-fledged political and diplomatic recognition of the new government in Kabul, but relations with the Taliban* continue, and Afghanistan's cooperation with its neighbors is gradually gaining momentum.

Regarding security and stability in Afghanistan, Russia and China have a wide range of common interests. Maintaining active regional bilateral cooperation and relying on international institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), would be wise. By ensuring national security interests and regional stability, Russia and China would reduce the residual negative influence of destructive international actors (state and non-state) in Afghanistan. This, in turn would allow both countries to demonstrate their influence as responsible great powers.

This report is the first attempt to compare the views of Russian and Chinese experts on the current state and prospects of Afghanistan following the period of foreign presence in the country. The authors do not always share views on the results of the Taliban's* first year in power; there are optimists and pessimists among both Russian and Chinese analysts. Nevertheless, we think the report demonstrates a high level of convergence between Moscow and Beijing on the main problems surrounding Afghan's transition. Such unity gives us hope for further fruitful cooperation between the two countries on Afghan-related issues, the interests of Afghan society, as well as regional security and development.

* This organization is banned in Russia.

Assessing Afghanistan's Security Situation Following the 2021 August Withdrawal of U.S. Forces

Political, militaristic, economic, humanitarian, informational, and other security aspects in Afghanistan are systematically interconnected. The current situation shows how important each of these aspects are in ensuring security not only for the country, but for the entire region.

The fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, came as a surprise not only to the international community and the Afghan elite, but also to the Taliban* themselves, who had not anticipated such a quick rise to power; they were preparing for a longer struggle.¹ The international community's reaction to the Taliban's* victory was mixed. On the one hand, there were concerns about the prospect of terrorist escalation and Afghan civil radicalization. The Taliban's* rise prompted many countries to immediately evacuate their citizens and Afghan cooperatives from the country. Alarming sentiments of the international community were reinforced by the fact that numerous radical groups perceived the Taliban's* coming to power as a victory for jihadists.²

On the other hand, the victory of the Taliban* served as a basis for optimistic forecasts: the establishment of full control by one force over the entire Afghanistan territory was seen as a prerequisite for stabilizing the region. That is why when the Taliban* came to power, some analysts believed that it would mean numerous ambitious transport and energy projects would be realized, and whose successful completion would be dependent on a stable military and political situation. Such projects include the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline³, the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000)⁴ energy project, the Trans-Afghan transport corridor⁵, and others.

In addition to using Afghanistan's transit potential as a bridge between Central and South Asia, political-military stabilization would also pave the way for expanding mineral resource development. The value of Afghanistan's reserves is estimated by foreign and local experts at USD 1 trillion to 3 trillion. Afghanistan is rich in copper, natural gas, uranium, gold, oil, iron ore, coal, lithium, chromium, lead, zinc, precious stones, marble, etc.⁶

* This organization is banned in Russia.

¹ Konarovskiy M.A., Nessar M.O., "Taliban's Afghanistan: What's Next?" // *International Life*, 2021, No. 12, p. 14-27

² "Terrorists Want to Take Advantage of the Taliban Coming to Power, Stated the MFA" // *INA Russia Today* 22.12.2021.
URL: <https://ria.ru/20211222/afghanistan-1764865631.html>

³ Trans-Afghan Gas Pipeline Runs Through Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan – India.

⁴ Aimed at energy system integration in Central Asia with South Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan with Afghanistan and Pakistan).

⁵ One of the trans-Afghan transport projects, the Mazar-i-Sharif – Kabul – Peshavar railroad route, would serve as a link between Central Asia via Afghanistan and Pakistan with the Middle East. The Haf – Great railroad would connect Chinese railroads with Iran via Afghanistan.

⁶ "Factbox: What are Afghanistan's Untapped Minerals and Resources?" // Reuters. 19.07.2021.
URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/what-are-afghanistans-untapped-minerals-resources-2021-08-19/>

Virtually all countries that engage with Afghanistan one way or another, do so for the sake of their state's economic interests. During the initial months of the Taliban* rule, Qatar⁷, China⁸, Pakistan⁹, Turkmenistan¹⁰ and Uzbekistan¹¹ were most active in interacting with the new administration. The foreign ministers of these countries officially visited Kabul and held bilateral talks with their Afghan counterparts.

Despite the interest of external actors and the active support at Iran's top departmental and political levels, it has not yet been possible to actual deliver their plans. The main reasons are as follows: first, threats in the security sphere persist and will hardly disappear anytime soon; second, there are existing contradictions within the Taliban* itself; and third, the international community does not recognize the new Afghan government.

Two decades of warfare have turned Afghanistan into a haven for extremism and terrorism. The former Afghan government claimed that more than 20 terrorist groups existed in Afghanistan, most of them from foreign countries. These include Al Qaeda*, the Islamic Party of Turkestan* (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan*, Lashkar-e-Taiba*, to name a few. Each of them has their own political goals and complex relations with the Afghan Taliban*. The security threats posed by ISIS-Khorasan* (Wilayat Khorasan*) persist. Since its formation, Wilayat Khorasan* has been hostile to the Afghan Taliban* and there have been repeated armed clashes between them.

After the withdrawal of coalition forces from Afghanistan, ISIS-Khorasan* quickly regained its status as one of the most active terrorist groups in the country and one of the leading anti-Taliban forces. At the beginning of 2022, the number of Wilayat Khorasan* members grew from 2,200 people to about 4,000, with about half of them coming from abroad. In February 2022, a Taliban* spokesman said that dozens of members of the Islamic State* had been arrested in Kabul and its neighboring provinces, with 60,000 shells, 13 armored vehicles, 13 tons of gunpowder and explosives seized from them¹². Since April 2022, the group has significantly escalated its terrorist attacks. Every month, ISIS-Khorasan* fighters have carried out terrorist attacks against the Taliban* and civilians (mostly Shia Muslims) in different parts of Afghanistan, including attacks on mosques,

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁷ "Head of Qatar's MFA Arrives in Kabul" // TASS 12.09.2021. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12365731>

⁸ "Head of Chinese MFA Pays a Visit to Afghanistan" // ROSBUSINESSCONSULTING, JSC. 24.03.2022. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/623c57429a79473daf24f121>

⁹ Peshimam G. "Pakistan Foreign Minister Makes First Trip to Kabul Since Taliban Takeover" // Reuters. 21.10.2021. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-foreign-minister-makes-first-trip-kabul-since-taliban-takeover-2021-10-21/>

¹⁰ "Head of Turkmenistan's MFA Visits Afghanistan to Discuss Joint Economic Projects" // TASS. 01.11.2021. URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/12822807>

¹¹ "Head of Uzbekistan's MFA Meets with the Taliban Government in Kabul" // Lenta.ru LLC. 07.10.2021. URL: https://lenta.ru/news/2021/10/07/meeting_with_taliban/

¹² "Kullab S. Taliban Official Says Dozens of Criminals Arrested in Sweeps" // Hasht-e Subh Daily. 27.02.2022. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220402161156/https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/taliban-official-dozens-criminals-arrested-sweeps-83142138>

schools, markets, and residential neighborhoods in Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kunduz, and other cities.

In March 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov pointed this problem out: "ISIS* their supporter's plans to destabilize Central Asian states and spread instability to Russia¹³ is particularly concerning." State preoccupation with ISIS-Khorasan's* activities outside Afghanistan is understandable, given that the group is part of a global jihadist movement. The U.S. Institute for the Study of War (ISW) does not rule out Afghanistan-based fighter involvement in several attacks in the neighboring states.¹⁴

Additionally, according to a January 28, 2022 UN report ("The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security"), since the Taliban* came to power, the number of conflicts and civilian casualties has diminished, which markedly eased the activities of international humanitarian organizations.¹⁵ This can be explained by the fact that from 2004 to 2021, the Taliban* significantly increased its efforts to fight the U.S. and its puppet government in Kabul, often resorting to terrorist methods (see Table 1). Consequently, since the Taliban* became the ruling elite in August of 2021, the number of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan declined.

Table 1. Civilian Losses in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2021

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Fatalities	1,052	1,281	1,575	1,159	1,344	1,686	1,615	1,644	1,672	1,729	1,422	1,304	1,426
Wounded	1,440	1,990	2,341	1,979	2,577	3,209	3,367	3,631	3,600	3,476	2,551	2,214	2,199
Total losses	2,492	3,271	3,916	3,138	3,921	4,895	4,982	5,275	5,272	5,205	3,973	3,518	3,625

Source: "Reports on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict" // United Nations¹⁶.

Despite some positive trends, the number of civilian casualties remains high. In 2021, the terrorist-related death toll stood at 1,426 people in Afghanistan. Between August 2021 and June 2022, the total number of victims stood at

* This organization is banned in Russia.

¹³ The Address of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in the Course of a Plenary Session at the Meeting of Afghanistan's Neighboring States (Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), Tuxi, March 31, 2022 // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 31.03.2022. URL: https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/1807302/

¹⁴ Mills P. Islamic State Khorasan Province Expands Attacks beyond Afghanistan // The Institute for the Study of War. 01.06.2022. URL: <https://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Islamic%20State%20Khorasan%20Province%20Ramadan%20Campaign%20April%202022%20ISW.pdf>

¹⁵ The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General // United Nations General Assembly Security Council. 28.01.2022. URL: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg_report_on_afghanistan_january_2022.pdf

¹⁶ Reports on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict // United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. URL: <https://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>

2,106 (700 dead, 1,406 wounded).¹⁷ According to the UN, a significant portion of civilian casualties during this period resulted from the Wilayat Khorasan* attacks.¹⁸ These figures only partially favor an optimistic view on the future of the country's stability.

The Taliban* has notably failed to demonstrate any willingness to sever ties with other extremist forces. The press periodically receives reports about their connections to certain terrorist organizations. This concern has been repeatedly expressed by both states¹⁹ and the UN.²⁰

The Taliban's* issue of separating itself from extremist and terrorist forces proves difficult, especially given that there are many foreign fighters in Afghanistan who have fought alongside the Taliban*. The Taliban* cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach to all foreign terrorists. It is also important to bear in mind that terrorism is linked to interstate tensions. Terrorist forces in one country are often seen as "freedom fighters" or "human rights activists" in another, and in some cases, they are even viewed as "strategic instruments" or agents of influence. In addition, there are disagreements within the Taliban* about how to deal with foreign fighters.

The Taliban*, responding to reports about its ties to foreign organizations, usually emphasizes that they will not allow other organizations to use Afghan territory for launching attacks on other countries. In doing so, the Taliban* indicate their control over other forces in the country and, consequently, their ability to mediate between terrorist groups and external actors. An example of such mediation can be the negotiations organized between the Pakistan and representatives of the Pakistani wing of the Taliban* called Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan*. However, the reality is that the Afghan government is far from being in total control of terrorist groups.

Anti-Taliban* movements, which intensified attacks from March to May of 2022 (primarily in northern Afghanistan), are fighting against the new government. These forces, represented by the Afghan National Resistance Front (ANRF), are mostly supporters of the former government, seeking to overthrow the Taliban* in the name of "human rights and democracy" with the help of domestic and foreign anti-Taliban groups. By April 2022, these militias rallied around commanders unfriendly to the new government, but not into a unified anti-Taliban group. Given that the approaches of ISIS-Khorasan* and the anti-Taliban militias to the Taliban* coincide, a partial merger of these two forces is possible, which can become one of Afghanistan's worst-case scenarios.

¹⁷ "UN Releases Report on Human Rights in Afghanistan Since the Taliban Takeover" // United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan". 20.07.2022. URL: <https://unama.unmissions.org/un-releases-report-human-rights-afghanistan-taliban-takeover>

* This organization is banned in Russia.

¹⁸ "Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict" // United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. 2020. URL: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_report_2020_revs3.pdf

¹⁹ Yegorov I. Patrushev: "The Risk of Terrorist Penetration from Afghanistan to Neighboring States Has Risen". 27.05.2022. URL: <https://rg.ru/2022/05/27/patrushev-vyros-risk-proniknoveniia-terroristov-iz-afghanistana-v-sosednie-strany.html>

²⁰ Donnell L. "Pakistan Sponsored Terror Next Door. Now, It's Back to Roost" // FP. 31.05.2022. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/31/pakistan-terrorism-al-qaeda-taliban-tp/>

The viability of anti-Taliban movements depends on many factors. Among them is the fragmentation of opposition forces. However, in recent months, certain anti-Taliban groups have expressed interest in political consolidation, including certain foreign organizations. For instance, on May 18, 2022, former Vice-President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Abdul-Rashid Dostum held a meeting with anti-Taliban politicians in Turkey. The statement adopted at the end of the meeting noted the importance to seek peace in Afghanistan by both political and diplomatic processes, but not exclude the use of armed forces.²¹

The survival of anti-Taliban forces also depends on the level of popular discontent, which may be particularly triggered by radical decisions made by the Taliban*, as well as the socio-economic situation of the country. Ever since Kabul's power change, foreign financial aid has been cut, while the U.S. froze Afghanistan's assets and imposed sanctions on the country's financial system. These measures paralyzed the banking and financial system as well as foreign trade operations.

Now, the Taliban* strives to establish political and legal order in Afghanistan. Features of the new government includes the use of Sharia law as the main governing principal of the county, as well as establish Islam as the nation's official ideology. Pashtuns are a dominant group among Afghan officials, while other ethnic groups are a lot less represented in the government. There are also no women employed in top government positions, all of which is provoking new conflicts with anti-Taliban forces.

An equally dangerous challenge to Afghanistan's security is contradictory nature of the Taliban* itself. An analysis of government* activities and leader statements²² indicate heightened internal inter-tribal and inter-factional contradictions following the Taliban's* rise to power. Particularly, there are contradictions between the so-called radical (Haqqani clan) and moderate wings (natives of Kandahar) of the government. The confrontation is developing along two fronts: first, the traditional rivalry between the Pashtun Durrani and Ghilzai tribes has intensified; and secondly, there are clashing opinions and approaches to problems between the government in Kabul and the movement's spiritual leader, who presumably is based in Kandahar. It is likely that a lack of consensus among the Taliban's* ruling elite has been the main reason for the Taliban's* failure to fulfill its promises to fight terrorist groups, form an inclusive government, and uphold women's rights. The central government often pursues policies inconsistent with their promises; for example, in March of 2022, authorities announced high schools were closed for girls, several hours after the start of the school day.²³

* This organization is banned in Russia.

²¹ "Statement Released from Afghan Politicians at Turkey Meeting" // TOLONews. 19.05.2022.
URL: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-178087>

²² "Deputy Foreign Minister of Taliban Stands Up for Women" // Afghanistan.ru. 23.05.2022.
URL: <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/149322.html>

²³ Khalid S. "Taliban Soldiers Must Wear Military Uniforms: Baghlan Residents" // Hasht-e Subh Daily 11.12.2021.
URL: <https://8am.af/eng/taliban-soldiers-must-wear-military-uniforms-baghlan-residents/>; Watkins A. "Taliban Rule at Three Months" [CTC-SENTINEL]. Vol. 14, Iss. 09.11.2021. P. 9–10; "What Caused the Taliban's Cruel U-turn on Girls' Education?" // The National. 24.03.2022. URL: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/editorial/2022/03/24/what-caused-the-talibans-cruel-u-turn-on-girls-education/>; "The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General" // United Nations General Assembly Security Council. 28.01.2022.
URL: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg_report_on_afghanistan_january_2022.pdf

Between 2001 and 2021, the Taliban* has been tightening its reigns against the U.S. in every way possible, making alliances and recruiting new members among fighters, smugglers, and criminal groups from around the world. This mixed, poorly disciplined coalition struck a serious blow to the Taliban's* image and its ability to govern the nation, as well as create numerous other problems. Armed fighters and groups that identify themselves as Taliban* openly engage in criminal activities. Some members of the movement use their position for personal gain, intervening in conflicts between ethnic or tribal groups over land and water resources and taking revenge on their rivals, guided by their own selfish interests.

The ability of the Taliban* to maintain unity within the movement and fulfill their promise to “serve the people” will directly be linked to ensuring their governability. On October 11, 2021, the Taliban* formed a commission to expel “undesirables” – mostly those who had engaged in criminal activities or never shared the Taliban's* values. In early 2022, hundreds of people were laid off from work related to the Taliban*. However, if this policy continues, it could exacerbate conflicts within the Taliban* and strengthen anti-Taliban political forces.²⁴

In terms of international recognition of the Taliban* government, the situation is unprecedented. Several states keep embassies in Kabul, and some countries have already accredited Taliban* diplomats. Even though there are high-level relations between states and Taliban* representatives, so far not a single nation has officially recognized the Afghan government.

Accepting the Taliban* is difficult for several reasons. First, the Taliban* is recognized as a terrorist movement in several countries. Between 1998 and 2010, for example, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on several Taliban* leaders, 20 of which are now key members of the new government. The U.S. has yet to lift an FBI arrest warrant against Sirajuddin Haqqani, leader of the Haqqani Network*, a “foreign terrorist organization,” and leader of the Taliban*. Second, many actions and decisions of Taliban* are at odds with various UN principles, as well as international ethical and legal norms. Third, the declining level of public confidence in the current Taliban* government due to inconsistent policies has also complicated state recognition.

Diplomatic recognition also largely depends on how the Taliban* is perceived by the international community. This is due to the Taliban's* policies from 1996 to 2001, when they first came to power, as well as to their 20-year history of using of violence and terror against the U.S. This negative impression cannot be overcome in the short term.

Additionally, authors of this report believe that the Taliban* is unlikely to meet the international community's expectations regarding reforming itself at this moment

* This organization is banned in Russia.

²⁴ DeCamp D. “Taliban Calls for Unity as Protests Spread in Afghanistan” // *Antiwar.com*. 19.08.2021.
URL: <https://news.antiwar.com/2021/08/19/taliban-calls-for-unity-as-protests-spread-in-afghanistan/> ;
“The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General” // United Nations General Assembly Security Council. 28.01.2022.
URL: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg_report_on_afghanistan_january_2022.pdf ;
Lulla Hanif D. L. “Taliban's Minister Mullah Hanafi Calls for Unity Among Afghans” // *News of Asia*. 29.04.2022.
URL: <http://newsasia.com/talibans-minister-mullah-hanafi-calls-for-unity-among-afghans/>

in time. Many countries have three preconditions that must be met if they were to officially recognize the Taliban*: first, they must establish a fully representative and inclusive government; second, pursue policies promoting gender equality; and third, sever all ties with extremist and terrorist organizations.

The international community is concerned about the Taliban's* inability fulfil their promises, including granting full access to education for girls.²⁵ Discriminatory gender policies are closely linked to Afghanistan's Pashtun culture. Although the current government's policies are less radical than those pursued by the 20th century Taliban*, many of the restrictions imposed are not in the interests of Afghan women and are contrary to the generally accepted international norms.

One of the major threats to Afghanistan's security now and in the foreseeable future is its dysfunctional economy. The new government's ability to pass this test will directly affect its legitimacy. Protecting the population in the face of anti-government activity will truly test Taliban's* capability to run Afghanistan.

The solution to the security problems depends on a number of interrelated factors, including the Taliban* keeping to its commitments, on which there appears to be no consensus within the ruling elite. Ensuring long-term stability in Afghanistan will require concerted efforts by the international community, especially in major Central Asian countries.

* This organization is banned in Russia.

²⁵ "UN Chief Slams "Broken" Taliban Promises Made to Women, Girls" // Al Jazeera Media Network. 11.10.2021.
URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/11/un-chief-slams-broken-taliban-promises-made-to-women-girls>

The Role of the Region in Solving Afghanistan's Challenges

After the withdrawal of coalition troops, the West's position in Afghanistan radically deteriorated and the Taliban's* rise to power in Kabul notably increased the importance of the region itself in addressing national security and development issues. Aware of this dynamic and seeking a stronger stance under such new circumstances, almost all of Afghanistan's neighbors stepped up their efforts and activities in the region.

This approach is in the Taliban's* interests. Realizing that in the current environment they can hardly count on *de jure* recognition by the world community anytime soon, they are gradually expanding the scope of *de facto* international and (primarily) regional ties. Operationally, they have established diverse business relations with the PRC, Central Asian states (except Tajikistan), Iran, several Middle East states, and others.²⁶ Until recently, Kabul interacted quite pragmatically with Islamabad. On the one hand, the Taliban* sought to maximize its political potential and lobbying opportunities on the world stage, but on the other hand, they tried to suppress Pakistan's' desire to be the sole beneficiary of the relationship it has with Afghanistan.

As Russian experts have pointed out, the outcome of a meeting in Tunxi (PRC) in the spring of 2022, attended by Afghanistan, representatives from neighboring states and Russia, was particularly important, given that those high-ranked delegates tried to develop region-wide approaches to building relations with Afghanistan and to overcome the country's economic difficulties.²⁷ Respect for Afghanistan's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity was once again emphasized, as was support for the Afghan people to freely choose their own future.²⁸ The attendees stated that a peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan serves to the common interests of all Central Asian nations. The delegates paid special attention to the need for national reconciliation based on the "creation of a broad and inclusive political coalition, the approval of moderate and reasonable internal and foreign policies, and the development of friendly relations with all states, especially with its immediate neighbors."²⁹

Participants also focused on Kabul's commitments to prevent Afghanistan from

* This organization is banned in Russia.

²⁶ Thus, Chinese companies have already set out to discuss required conditions to develop the Aynak copper ore deposit. Tashkent handed management of the railway line Hairaton – Mazar-e-Sherif from Termez, Uzbekistan over to Afghanistan. Some of Afghanistan's neighbors, including those in Central Asia as well as Iran, have simplified Iran's trading procedural processes.

²⁷ "On a Ministerial Conference of Afghanistan's Neighboring States in Tunxi, China" // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 31.03.2022. URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1807312/

²⁸ To this effect, the coordinated approaches were approved at a meeting held on April 22, 2022 in the 1+5 format (Russia and Central Asian nations).

²⁹ "Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the Afghan Issue Among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan" // Embassy of the People's Republic of China and the Hellenic Republic. 09.09.2021. URL: <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cegr/eng/zgyw/t1905904.htm>

turning into a threat to its neighbors, and on the need to divisively counteract the activities of international terrorist organizations in Afghanistan. Expressing concern about the lack of ample efforts in this direction, the leaders called for “more visible” steps from the Taliban* and declared their readiness to expand cooperation with them. In light of the dire socio-economic situation in Afghanistan, the parties concerned emphasized the need to honor their commitments regarding Afghanistan’s economic recovery and future development. Stressing the United Nation’s key role as a humanitarian aid provider to the country, participants also called to expand these efforts and reaffirmed their readiness to step up robust humanitarian action to facilitate Afghanistan’s economic recovery and transform it into an important transportation and logistics hub for the entire region.³⁰

Concrete steps, both the ones already implemented by Afghanistan’s neighbors and those planned, are reflected in the Tunxi Initiative which supports the country’s economic revival and promotes practical cooperation with Kabul. The document mentions different areas, such as humanitarian aid, collaboration in transport and logistics, the economy and trade, agriculture and energy, as well as national professional staff training (more than 70 positions total).³¹ The decision to conduct regular special representative consultations should also contribute to a better relationship between Afghanistan and its neighbors, especially when internal political uncertainties and serious political challenges persist in the country.

Additionally, three working groups were established, political and diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian, plus one on security and stability issues, which would ensure the implementation of the decisions made at Foreign Minister meetings. Thus, Afghanistan’s March meeting with its neighbors and Russia, may well be regarded as the start of a new phase in their practical cooperation, not only in the interests of political and economic stabilization in Afghanistan’s development, but also for the sake of ensuring long-term stability and security in the entire region.

Meanwhile, the growing instability in Afghanistan, continuing centrifugal trends in Central Asia, and difficulties in finding middle-ground solutions to a number of lingering border and water problems inside the region could negatively impact the implementation of this initiative. The current strained relations between Dushanbe and Kabul, Dushanbe and Bishkek, as well as the difficult situation in Tajik’s Pamirs Mountains may distract states in this region away from the Afghan problem. Recently, negative trends have also developed in Afghan-Iranian relations due to the influx of Afghan refugees (about 850,000 people) and challenges in water distribution from the bordering Helmand river. A similar situation can be observed on the Afghan-Pakistani border, especially because of increased activi-

* This organization is banned in Russia.

³⁰ “Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on the Afghan Issue Among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan” // Embassy of the People’s Republic of China and the Hellenic Republic. 09.09.2021.
URL: <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cegr/eng/zgyw/t1905904.htm>

³¹ “The Tunxi Initiative of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan on Supporting Economic Reconstruction in and Practical Cooperation with Afghanistan” // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. 01.04.2022.
URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202204/t20220401_10662024.html

ties of the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan*, a group hostile to Islamabad, which has long been maintaining close contacts with the Taliban* leadership. The recent bombing³² of some parts of Afghan bordering Pakistan from Pakistani territory has damaged these bilateral relations.

The international community's ambiguous approach to the Taliban* also weakens the possibility of achieving a unified approach toward Kabul. This factor also reduces the effectiveness of benign external impacts on the country against what is perceived globally as a need for an inclusive government in Afghanistan with real, rather than formal, participation of various ethnic, sectarian and political forces.

Consolidated international calls for forming a broadly representative central government have not yet been particularly considered by the Taliban*. Regional leaders and their supporters, when opposing the Taliban*, are guided mainly by the desire to maximally ensure a "free hand" in the regions of their historic influence. First, this applies to the northern and western parts of the country which is historically home to Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara people.

While forming an inclusive Afghan government, the issue of possible regionalization or federalization, which was raised time and again, should also be revisited at some point. This option was quite actively supported in some of Afghanistan's neighboring states (for example, by the first President of Uzbekistan, I. Karimov), as well as by several foreign political scientists. In Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution, a provision officially recognized some local languages and dialects; Pashto and Dari were given a special status in areas densely populated by their speakers³³, showing the awareness Afghan leaders have for the need to consider ethnic factors in domestic affairs. Nevertheless, attempts to implement more radical ideas of federalization could lead to additional dramatic destabilization both in Afghanistan and in the entire region.³⁴

* This organization is banned in Russia.

³² "Media: Pakistan Delivers a Series of Strikes on Afghanistan" // TASS. 16.04.2022.
URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14394001>

³³ "The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Art. 16" // Constitutions of the World's Nations. Roman Pashkov's Library of Constitutions. URL: <https://worldconstitutions.ru/?p=24>

³⁴ Knyazev A. "Dividing Afghanistan to Cause Domino Effect Throughout Central Asia" // Alternativa. 07.05.2022.
URL: <https://alternatio.org/articles/item/2683->

Russia's Security Interests in Afghanistan and Means of Ensuring Afghan Stability

Given the new political environment, Russia is interested in encouraging regional players to address Afghan-related problems and play a notable role in this process. Particularly, this can be done by utilizing Russia's past experiences of creating favorable conditions for tackling Afghan-related challenges, including using the Moscow format.

Because of its apprehensions regarding long-term security in Central Asia, as well as the desire to prevent instability from spreading into Russia, Russia's direct involvement in addressing Afghanistan's challenges, especially given recent developments on its western flank, will only be growing. Moscow remains deeply concerned about the activity of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, particularly along the border with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as the inability (or perhaps unwillingness) of the Taliban* to really counteract those outbursts.³⁵ In this context, Russia supports Tajikistan's initiative to create a "security belt"³⁶ around Afghanistan.

International terrorist groups in Afghanistan with a regional agenda (like ISIS-Khorasan* which targets Central Asia, and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement* which targets the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) have been stepping up their activities which may result in long-term implications.³⁷

The problem of drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Russia through Central Asia and terrorist organization convergence with cross-border groups engaged in illicit drug trafficking are also a cause for serious concern. In this regard, Russia, together with other CSTO member states, intends to take every measure necessary to improve the Taliban's* military-political activities to promote security in its area of responsibility, as well as expand practical cooperation with leading multilateral Eurasian structures, such as the SCO and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).³⁸

Meanwhile, Russia is cautiously optimistic about the Taliban* government's efforts to keep the state "afloat"³⁹, as well as its social and anti-terrorist activities

* This organization is banned in Russia.

³⁵ "Briefing by Deputy Director of Information and Press Department at Russia's MFA" A.A. Zaitsev. Moscow, May 6, 2022 // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 06.05.2022. URL: https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/1811952/

³⁶ "Secretaries of Security Councils Call Upon Responsible Nations to Commit Their Commitments on Afghanistan" // TASS. 27.05.2022. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14746879>

³⁷ Alimov R. "Russia – Central Asia: How to Develop Cooperation under Instability" // The Fund for the Development and Support of International Discussion Club Valdai. 17.05.2022. URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/rossiya-tsentralnaya-aziya-v-usloviyakh-nestabilnosti/>

³⁸ "Statement by the Collective Security Council of the Collective Security Treaty Organization on the Occasion of the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Collective Security Treaty and Twentieth Anniversary of the Collective Security Treaty Organization" // President of Russia. 16.05.2022. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5800>

³⁹ "Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Address in the Course of a Plenary Session at the Meeting of Afghanistan's Neighboring States (Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), Tuncxi, March 31, 2022" // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 31.03.2022. URL: https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/1807302/

in general. Moscow welcomes the expansion of its foreign relations with Afghan authorities, emphasizing cooperation with neighboring countries, and assumes that all these steps will eventually contribute to their official international recognition. However, some voice that insufficient ethno-religious and political representation in the Taliban* government is still a major obstacle. Russia is determined to continue encouraging Kabul to cooperate with its regional partners, to work towards overcoming this. According to Russian experts, the decision of the Taliban* to hold an “all-Afghan summit” (or traditional *loya jirga*⁴⁰) with influential representatives and politicians participating from various ethnic groups to discuss relevant national governance problems, was largely the result of persistent efforts by Russia, China, Afghanistan’s neighbors, as well as the world community.

Moscow’s abstention on the March 17, 2022 UN Security Council Resolution #2626⁴¹ vote on extending the mandate of the UN Mission in Afghanistan⁴² reflected Russia’s early 2022 position towards its relationship with the new Taliban*. In same light, Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs accredited the new authorities in Kabul by: hosting its first diplomat⁴³, which paralleled a similar decision taken by China; setting up a large visit of the Russian delegation to Kabul, including numerous Russian trade and economic institutions⁴⁴; providing humanitarian aid for Afghanistan without any conditions⁴⁵; expanding trade with Afghanistan (particularly, the export of agricultural products)⁴⁶; resuming flights to Moscow by Ariana Afghan Airlines⁴⁷, and more.

Russia’s interest in energy cooperation, the development of Afghanistan’s transport infrastructure, including the use of capacities of the joint transport companies Afsotr and Astras, in mineral projects, agro-industrial sector and other areas⁴⁸ remains unchanged. At the same time, limited funds and instability in Afghanistan keep stalling Russian investments.

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁴⁰ Loya jirga is the all-Afghan Elders Council.

⁴¹ “Resolution 2626 (2022)” // United Nations Security Council. 17.03.2022.
URL: [https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/291/52/PDF/N2229152.pdf](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/291/52/PDF/N2229152.pdf?OpenElement); Russia abstained because Western members of the UN refused to directly mention the new de-facto Kabul authorities in the Resolution.

⁴² “Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Address in the Course of a Plenary Session at the Meeting of Afghanistan’s Neighboring States (Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), Tunxi, March 31, 2022” // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 31.03.2022. URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1807302/

⁴³ “Moscow Accredited the First Diplomat From the Taliban Government” // INA Russia Today. 31.03.2022.
URL: <https://ria.ru/20220331/akkreditatsiya-1780991138.html>

⁴⁴ Ardashova P. “Members of the Afghan Government Meet with Russian Delegation” // FSUE Rossiyskaya Gazeta Editorial Office 25.03.2022. URL: <https://rg.ru/2022/03/25/chleny-pravitelstva-afganistana-vstretilis-s-delegaciej-iz-rf.html>

⁴⁵ “Lavrov Stated that the Russian Delegation had Delivered Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan” // INA Russia Today. 31.03.2022. URL: <https://ria.ru/20220331/gumpomosch-1780991928.html>

⁴⁶ “Record Increase of Food Export to Afghanistan from Russia” // Sputnik. 14.03.2022.
URL: <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20220414/russia-eksport-prodovolstvie-afganistan-1047619605.html>

⁴⁷ “Ariana Afghan Airlines Restarts Flights to Moscow” // Business News Media, JSC. 26.04.2022.
URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/news/2022/04/26/919835-ariana-afghan-airlines>

⁴⁸ “The Tunxi Initiative of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan Supporting Economic Reconstruction in and Practical Cooperation with Afghanistan” // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. 01.04.2022.
URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202204/t20220401_10662024.html

Considering Russia's particular interest in stabilizing Afghanistan as soon as possible, Russia will continue to expand its efforts for the sake of achieving this goal, regardless of what goes on in other areas of its foreign policy. That said, success in this area can only be ensured through coordinated efforts of all external forces concerned, with Central Asia playing a most decisive role. Russia-China cooperation and parallel steps taken by Russia and China could occupy a special place in this process, as they could stimulate the activity of Afghanistan's neighbors and ensure that the efforts made by regional players, are conducted within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Moscow format, and other venues.⁴⁹

In the international arena, Moscow advocates for Afghanistan reconstruction issues be addressed under the UN's supervision, which could streamline international assistance to Kabul in all needed aspects and counter the threat of terrorism. In this regard, Russia emphasizes its desire to broaden UN coordinated activities with regional efforts, respecting the interests of the involved states.⁵⁰

Against the backdrop of support for various formats and discussion platforms on the Afghan issue, Russia has until recently retained a certain optimism regarding cooperation within the extended "Big Three" framework, involving Russia, the United States, China and Pakistan. Meanwhile, the U.S. refusal to sign a relatively balanced document at the end of its next meeting in Tunxi, China, in the spring of 2022, cast doubt on further cooperation between Moscow and Washington regarding Afghanistan⁵¹, though this possibility is not completely ruled out.

The authors of this report feel that in light of the rapidly deteriorating relations between Russia the West, one can hardly expect any concerted action between Moscow and Washington regarding Afghanistan. Under the current circumstances, Russia's opponents will try to maximally establish uncertainty in Afghanistan and increase direct challenges to Russia's security on its southern front. This can be expressed by the increased pressure on Moscow's Central Asian partners to support anti-Russian sanctions, both bilaterally and through the US-Central Asia and EU-Central Asia mechanisms aimed, among other things, at strengthening Washington's and Brussels' influence in the region to the detriment of Russian interests.

The interaction between Russia and the United States on Afghanistan is also impeded by a several other fundamentally important circumstances. Russia, along with China and other regional states, proceeds from the premise that the West should assume primary financial responsibility for overcoming the

⁴⁹ "Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Address in the Course of a Plenary Session at the Meeting of Afghanistan's Neighboring States (Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), Tunxi, March 31, 2022" // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 31.03.2022. URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1807302/

⁵⁰ In this regard Moscow expressed bewilderment at the lack of coordination between the organizers (the UN as well as Qatar, Germany, and UK) and the participants in preparing a high-level conference on sending humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, which concurred with the preplanned meeting in China between Afghanistan's neighboring states, held on March 31, 2022

⁵¹ "Holding a Meeting of the Extended Big Three in Tunxi, China" // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 31.03.2022. URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/1807891/

crisis in Afghanistan and stabilizing the situation.⁵² Moscow is also critical of Washington's Kabul asset blocking schemes, and use of said funds to partially compensate the victims of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, as well as its condition-riddled humanitarian aid.

Given current international trends, the essence of the West's Afghan policy will continue to be anti-Russian and anti-Chinese. These factors will require further policy coordination by the two nations, both in Afghanistan and in Central Asia. Additionally, Russia will continue to oppose the deployment of U.S. and NATO military infrastructure to Central Asia, viewing it as a direct threat to the security on its southern border.⁵³

⁵² "Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Address during the Plenary Session at the Meeting of Afghanistan Neighboring States (Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), Tuxi, March 31, 2022" // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 31.03.2022. URL: https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/1807302/

⁵³ Ibid; "Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Answers Question from Media Following the Meeting of CIS Council of Foreign Ministers, Dushanbe, May 13, 2022" // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 13.05.2022. URL: https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/1813294/

China's Security Interests in Afghanistan and Paths to Protecting Afghan Security

The direct impact of Afghanistan's security issues on China was relatively moderate in previous years, although these challenges have complex, albeit indirect, implications for Beijing. As China's interests in the international arena expand, and it takes on great power policies, intensifying its special responsibility for protecting regional security, Afghanistan has become increasingly important to China.

Traditionally, Beijing has viewed Afghanistan in light of its own national security interests. The impact of the security situation in Afghanistan is particularly important on the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

The Taliban* is inextricably linked to the East Turkistan Islamic Movement* and other terrorist organizations. Several terrorist organizations have been active in Afghanistan for many years, often being intertwined with local tribes. For example, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement* regards Afghanistan as its "home-land," and the Taliban* has assisted its representatives by providing it funding, bases, transportation, arms and ammunition. In addition, the Taliban* helped the East Turkistan Islamic Movement* by training suicide bombers. The movement has also repeatedly participated in Taliban* operations.⁵⁴ In this regard, the Taliban* cannot completely disassociate itself from terrorist organizations, although it is concerned about the increased possibility of a terrorist threat. According to Chinese experts, there is a chance that the Taliban* is only ostentatiously combating terrorists while actually pandering to them.

It is important to remember that among the Taliban* there are representatives of both moderate and radical views. They hold to different opinions regarding the interaction with extremist and terrorist groups.

China needs to make sure that the Taliban* is willing and able to fight terrorism. So far, the Taliban* has not shown a strong resolve to deal with terrorism. The Taliban* can use counterterrorism to gain an extra edge in negotiations with major powers.

Although the Taliban* has promised to never let any force use the Afghan territory for causing any harm to China⁵⁵, individuals who pose a threat to the PRC have not been extradited to Beijing. Religious and ideological factors, including the Taliban* sticking to fundamentalist principles, suggest that the Taliban* is unlikely to stop supporting the East Turkistan Islamic Movement* entirely. According to Chinese experts, in the future it may regain its influence, propagate radical ideas

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁵⁴ Rasheed A., Kidwai S. A., "The ETIM Question: Taliban's Moment of Truth". November 29, 2021. URL: <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/etim-question-taliban-rasheed-kidwai-291121>

⁵⁵ "Wang Yi Meets with Head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar // Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland". 28.07.2021. URL: <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cegv/eng/zgyw/t1895950.htm>

abroad, send fighters to China to plan and carry out terrorist attacks, and threaten the Chinese border.

The Taliban* has relocated fighters of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement* and the Islamic Party of Turkistan* (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*) from their traditional strongholds in China-bordering Badakhshan to Baghlan, Takhar, as well as other provinces.⁵⁶ In the future, members of the group may become refugees or citizens of Afghanistan. The number of fighters in the group is estimated at around 200 to 700 people, and they continue to actively engage in preparations for terrorist attacks, impeding China's interests.

Terrorist forces from Afghanistan are infiltrating neighboring countries, threatening Chinese interests abroad. Since mid-April 2022, the Wilayat Khorasan group* has launched two rocket attacks against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan from Afghanistan. Even though the attacks resulted in no casualties, they demonstrated that ISIS-Khorasan* is using the chaos in the country to rapidly expand.⁵⁷ The group intends to expand its influence in Central Asia, which could undermine Chinese interests in the region.

ISIS-Khorasan* has increased the scale of its propaganda material distribution and now places greater emphasis on improving media effectiveness, heightening the risks of terrorist infiltration. The group has always published materials in Arabic, Pashto, and Dari, but has recently begun using more languages for its propaganda, including Urdu, Uzbek, Tajik and English. This measure is aimed at attracting disgruntled members of other jihadist groups and inciting jihads in Central Asia.

A January 2022 UN Security Council report⁵⁸ confirms that there is no recent indication that the Taliban* has taken steps to curtail foreign terrorist activities in the country. On the contrary, Central Asian terrorist groups such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement*, the Imam Bukhari Jamaat*, and the Islamic Party of Turkestan (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) are freely mobile. Some group leaders have visited Kabul and tried to get the Taliban* to support the unification of Central Asian fighters.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict left many countries in Central Asia to face a slow economic recovery, which can provoke an economic crisis and exacerbate security problems in the region. Socio-economic challenges will contribute to the growing influence of ISIS-Khorasan* and other groups, so the risks of terrorist attacks on neighboring countries will be mounting.

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁵⁶ Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan // *Confess.Gov*. 19.04.2022.
URL: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10604>

⁵⁷ Webber L., Valle R. "Islamic State in Afghanistan Looks to Recruit Regional Tajiks, Inflict Violence Against Tajikistan" // *Diplomat Media Inc*". 29.04.2022. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/islamic-state-in-afghanistan-looks-to-recruit-regional-tajiks-inflict-violence-against-tajikistan/>

⁵⁸ "Fourteenth report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat" // Security Council Report. URL: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2022_63_E.pdf

Additionally, terrorists from Afghanistan and anti-Taliban forces are infiltrating Pakistan, coordinating their efforts with the Pakistani Taliban* and the Baluchistan Liberation Army; this is fraught with more grievous threats to Chinese interests abroad.

The Taliban* seeks recognition from the international community, actively developing cooperation with both regional and international actors. However, given the mounting regional instability and provocative actions of various actors, conflicts between Afghanistan and its neighbors can erupt at any time. Since the Taliban* came to power, there have been at least two conflicts on Iran's border⁵⁹, the situation on the border with Turkmenistan⁶⁰ has escalated, and the Taliban* has deployed troops on the Afghan-Tajik border.⁶¹ The Taliban* also disputed with Uzbekistan over its failure to return Afghanistan's military aircraft.⁶² Relations between India and Afghanistan are also unstable. According to Chinese experts, due to growing nationalist sentiment among the Taliban* in Afghanistan and possible recent provocations from the India, tensions on the border with Pakistan may also arise.

Afghanistan's integration into the One Belt, One Road Initiative bumps up against a number of risks. The country continues to be severely affected by the aftermath of the pandemic and the difficulties caused by the withdrawal of U.S. troops. First, the Taliban* still has a long way to go in order to gain international recognition. In this regard, the reputation of the One Belt, One Road Initiative may be damaged by global criticism. With the U.S. and its allies teaming up to put pressure on the Taliban*, cooperation between China and Afghanistan is fraught with risks of isolation, and the companies involved could face sanctions. Afghanistan's increased participation in the One Belt, One Road Initiative could be seen by the international community as "soft aggression" on China's part, which would be detrimental to the Initiative's overall sustainable progress.

Second, futuristically speaking, the Taliban* may return to the era of Taliban* 1.0, which is fraught with extra political risks.⁶³ If China extends the One Belt, One Road Initiative to Afghanistan, as soon as the Taliban* violates international law or humanitarian principles, Beijing will face the choice of drawing a border between itself and the Taliban* or protecting it.

Cooperation with Afghanistan under the One Belt, One Road Initiative could lead to the rise of Islamic extremism in China and radicalize Chinese society. The activities of Taliban* could influence a certain part of the population in the Xinji-

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁵⁹ "Clashes Between Iranian Forces and Taliban Occurred on the Afghan Border" // MNC Izvestiya. 31.07.2022.
URL: <https://iz.ru/1372835/2022-07-31/na-granitse-afganistana-proizoshli-stolknoventiia-mezhdu-vs-irana-i-talibami>

⁶⁰ "Clashes Between the Taliban and Border Guards on Afghan-Turkmen Border" // TASS. 03.01.2022.
URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13349757>

⁶¹ "Taliban Explain the Reason for Pulling In Troops to Tajik Border" // Sputnik. 16.02.2022.
URL: <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20220216/taliby-voyska-granitsa-afganistan-tajikistan-1045921226.html>

⁶² Taliban Threatens Consequences in Case of Aircraft Non-Return // Gazeta.uz 12.01.2022.
URL: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/01/12/aircraft/>

⁶³ Zhu Yongbiao. "Challenges and Solutions to Afghanistan's Reconstruction". People's Tribune. Issue 2. 2022. p. 106109.

ang Uygur Autonomous Region, raising doubts about its deradicalization policy and provoking the rise of Islamism. So far, experts limit their discussions on the possibility of gradually including Afghanistan in the One Belt, One Road initiative.⁶⁴

Moving forward, political instability in a number of countries is expected to increase, as well as the frequency of terrorist attacks, which will significantly aggravate the security situation for China. Given the risks of escalation, China can accelerate the establishment and improvement of a regional anti-terrorist information platform to prevent terrorism, enhance the efficiency of intelligence gathering that contributes to combating terrorism, and actively collaborate with intelligence and anti-terrorist structures of the states neighboring Pakistan and Afghanistan. In addition, China should closely monitor the activities of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan and to establish an early warning system for identifying risk factors.

China could step up security activities for Chinese companies in Pakistan and Central Asia. Thus, according to Chinese experts, although Pakistan has achieved greater stability in the country, Islamabad needs to improve its security policies and raise awareness of the measures being taken.

The resolution of internal disputes in Afghanistan and Pakistan seems unlikely in the short term; moreover, the situation in these countries could be exacerbated by external provocations. Deteriorating relations between Kabul and Islamabad are not in Beijing's interests. There are currently calls in China for further strengthening the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan axis and including Afghanistan in the China-Pakistan economic corridor. However at this point, there are no practical prerequisites for this outcome due to contradictions in Afghan-Pakistani relations, including border disputes. China can promote ties between Afghanistan and Central Asia in order to reduce the risks of destabilizing the state and preventing a negative impact on Sino-Pakistani relations.

China's ability to directly impact the situation in Afghanistan, as well as the leverage it possesses, do not match its interest in resolving Afghanistan's challenges, or meet the expectations of the international community, or Kabul's expectations towards Beijing for that matter. Thus, Beijing should consider building up its influence potential in Afghanistan. In particular, China should increase support for talented Afghans, and encourage the exchange and training of Afghans in the PRC, as well as to provide sufficient support for Afghan students in China.

Afghanistan is currently experiencing economic, humanitarian, food and other crises, which are closely linked to issues pertaining to international recognition and economic cooperation. This is why the Taliban* is interested in significant political and economic support from China through increased Chinese investment, and participation in the One Belt, One Road Initiative.

When assisting Afghanistan, China's should take into account its national particu-

⁶⁴ Murtazashvili J. B. "China's Activities and Influence in South and Central Asia" // Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 17.05.2022.
URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/17/china-s-activities-and-influence-in-south-and-central-asia-pub-87146>

larities. Small-scale, one-off projects supervised by the government, coordinating internal and external resources for preliminary studies, resource allocation and targeted aid to Afghanistan should be prioritized. This way, security risks can be mitigated and possible public criticism, which arises whenever Chinese representatives lend a helping hand to Afghans, can be avoided.

Beijing can actively use multilateral mechanisms and platforms, to actively work towards ensuring a more stable situation in Afghanistan and settle its refugee problem. Thus, according to Chinese experts, China should support stronger cooperation within the framework of the SCO to crack Afghanistan's conundrum and assist the UN in providing humanitarian aid.

Afghanistan's neighboring states and extra-regional major powers are developing different approaches to solving the problem of Afghan refugees. However, neither the reception of refugees, nor the financial assistance of individual states can address the problem in a satisfying way. In this situation, the most urgent task is to develop a unified international plan. Thus, the U.S. hopes that the UN can lead the peace process in Afghanistan, which coincides with China's stance on the matter.⁶⁵ China would welcome the transfer of leadership in the Afghan peace process to the United Nations, facilitating the development of a peaceful settlement plan, as well as a stronger UN role in addressing the Afghan issue.

According to the Chinese, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other international organizations should resist political pressure and seek greater international consensus on Afghanistan. Furthermore, Beijing should encourage and support the Taliban* leadership in strengthening unity between all factions and ethnic groups in Afghanistan, developing an open and inclusive political structure acceptable to the Afghan people that is consistent with the interests of its citizens. This in turn, would contribute to Afghanistan's smoother political transformation. These are necessary conditions for preventing civil wars or humanitarian disasters, as well as reduce the number of casualties.

On a regional level, the PRC can encourage the SCO to play a more meaningful role in stabilizing the regional situation and supporting regional security at various levels. China can leverage coordination capabilities through the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group and other mechanisms.

The PRC could also play an active role in solving the refugee problem in Afghanistan and encourage the cultivation of legal crops to replace opium production.

On the national level, cooperation in SCO venues could be used to support Afghanistan's neighboring states, such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan, by constructing wider border checkpoints, installing video surveillance systems, strengthening joint patrol mechanisms, and enhancing border control capabilities. Additionally, cooperation within the SCO could address the problem of refugees in terms of preventing the deterioration of the terrorist situation on Afghani-

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁶⁵ "Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan" // The White House. 14.04.2021.
URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan>

stan's border. This could generally be used to maintain stability in the border areas.

Faced with the difficult situation in Afghanistan and real security threats, Tajikistan has put forward an initiative to create a "security belt" around Afghanistan, but this proposal has not received much attention from the international community.⁶⁶ According to the Chinese, China could indirectly support this idea – for example, within the SCO – or provide Tajikistan with more comprehensive assistance. This way China could simultaneously contribute to the reduction of its security threats and use these measures to build up its influence in Afghanistan.

⁶⁶ "Joint Statement of the Third Foreign Minister Meeting Among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan" // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 31.03.2022.
URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202203/t20220331_10658230.html

Challenges and Opportunities in Russian – Chinese Cooperation for Ensuring Security in Afghanistan

Relations between Russia and the Taliban* have a complicated history. Ever since the Taliban* seized power in 1996, Moscow has supported the Northern Alliance (United Islamic Salvation Front of Afghanistan) in its fight against the Taliban*. After the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, Russia cooperated with the U.S. in countering the Taliban*. In 2003, the Russian Supreme Court placed the Taliban* on the list of terrorist organizations banned in Russia.

While the Taliban* still remains on this list, Russia has been improving relations with its representatives since 2015. Experts attribute this change to the spur of tensions between Russia and the U.S., which increased after the start of the Ukraine crisis.⁶⁷ Russia no longer views the Taliban* as a serious security threat.⁶⁸ Moscow considers ISIS-Khorasan*, Al Qaeda*, Jamaat Ansarullah*, the Islamic Party of Turkestan* (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) and East Turkistan Islamic Movement, and similar organizations⁶⁹ to be the main threats emanating from Afghanistan.

Since the 1990s and up until now, China's main goal in Afghanistan was to fight terrorism and to eliminate the threat posed by the East Turkistan Islamic Movement.* China disapproves of the Taliban's* terrorist and extremist activities, but Beijing has no history of open hostility with the Taliban*, and Chinese policy towards the organization is mainly aimed at preventing support for the East Turkistan Islamic Movement.* The PRC also supports the suppression of other international terrorist organizations in Afghanistan.

Russia and China have a set of common strategic interests in Afghanistan, which could be a prerequisite for not only a successful dialogue, but also for broad cooperation between the two powers on this issue. Russian and Chinese experts agree that given the new political circumstances, Moscow and Beijing should strengthen cooperation on security issues in Afghanistan and attach greater importance to this region. This is not only because Afghanistan is linked to Russian and Chinese security interests, but also because it may have a serious impact on the security and stability of Central Asia.

After the withdrawal of coalition troops, the countries of the region should be able to assume major peacemaking commitments. Being the largest regional actors,

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁶⁷ Safranchuk I.A., Zhornist V.M. "The Case of the Taliban and Specifics of Polycentric World" // *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2021, vol. 19, No. 5, p. 24-37

⁶⁸ "As US Troops Leave the Country, Top Russian Official Says The Majority of the Taliban are Tired of Fighting & Are Ready for a Peaceful Afghanistan", Top Russian Official Says // Autonomous Nonprofit Organization TV-Novosti. 03.08.2021. URL: <https://www.rt.com/russia/530997-kabulov-taliban-wants-peace-afghanistan/>

⁶⁹ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Address During the Plenary Session at the Meeting of Afghanistan Neighboring States (Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), Tunxi, March 31, 2022 // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 31.03.2022. URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1807302/

it is Russia and China that will bear the greatest responsibility for maintain and protecting security. Also, given the current geopolitical situation, both Moscow and Beijing are interested in maintaining Afghanistan's neutral status. Afghanistan and its surrounding areas form the strategic rear for both nations; therefore, ensuring the security of this region plays a key role for both of them.

In terms of Russia's and China's common interests in Afghanistan, their fight against terrorism is of paramount importance. This has become the most important area of security cooperation between the two nations. Afghanistan is now a major hideout for terrorist organizations and terrorists from all over the world, especially from regions that are geographically close to this country. According to rough estimates, there are about 8,000 to 10,000 foreign terrorists in Afghanistan, mostly from Central and South Asia, the Caucasus, Pakistan, China, etc.⁷⁰ ISIS* and Al Qaeda* pose a long-term threat to neighboring countries and the entire region. Afghanistan is a possible bridgehead for international terrorism and extremism to penetrate Central Asia and then into Russia and China, with the associated risks of spreading jihadist ideology and integration with terrorist groups within the two countries.

The cross-border nature of terrorism commands combating it at the global and regional levels. The main areas of Russian – Chinese cooperation could be to facilitate consensus in the global community on fighting terrorism, avert politicking in this sphere, reduce competition between major powers, encourage the West to abandon its policy of double standards, promote stability in Afghanistan, prevent ISIS* and other terrorist organization expansion, and exchange intelligence information.

Despite Russia and China's tense relations with Western nations, especially in light of the Ukraine crisis, international terrorist development is a global threat to all. The U.S. and Europe fear that international terrorist organizations, in particular ISIS* and Al Qaeda*,⁷¹ may stir greater activity. For the West, Russia and China are indispensable in the fight against international terrorism in Afghanistan, and effective counterterrorism is inseparable from cooperation with Moscow and Beijing. Though the Russian Federation and China cannot anticipate forming a comprehensive united anti-terrorist front with the United States and Europe, some cooperation with the West is possible, nonetheless.

It should also be noted that if the Taliban's* domestic policy becomes more religiously oriented*, the approaches of Russia, China, the U.S., and Europe to the Taliban* may diverge. Even Moscow and Beijing may differ in their vision. Different positions will also manifest themselves in the international recognition of the Taliban* government, which will turn Afghanistan into a new area for controversy between Russia, China, the U.S., and Europe, thus place new obstacles for Russia and China in promoting international cooperation.

⁷⁰ "Patrushev Warns about a Possible Deterioration of the Situation in Afghanistan", May 27, 2022, Afghanistan.ru. URL: <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/149367.html> ; Shashok L., "The Asian International of Terror" // Nezavisimaya gazeta. 26.05.2022. URL: https://nvo.ng.ru/gpoliti/2022-05-26/1_1190_asia1.html

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁷¹ "Joint Communiqué by Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS" // U.S. Department of State. 11.05.2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/joint-communicue-by-ministers-of-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-2/>

Turning to international formats is especially relevant amid limited funds, which may seriously impact the effectiveness of Russia-China interaction on Afghanistan's security issues. Russia and China can only take a "passive" rather than an "active" approach to solving the Afghan problem. The two countries do not intend to send a contingent to Afghanistan and cannot directly root out terrorist groups in Afghan territory, reacting only to cross-border attacks.

The fight against international terrorist organizations could be carried out using Taliban* forces. Extending military assistance to the movement and enhancing its capacity to fight terrorist organizations could help eradicate terrorism, but such steps are not politically, diplomatically, or militarily feasible. Developing a military dimension to the relationship is very risky given the country's internal political instability which can draw global and regional condemnation. Additionally, doubts remain about the movement's readiness to fight international terrorist groups, and there is no guarantee that military assistance will be used according to the stated goals.

According to Chinese experts, Moscow and Beijing should urge the Taliban* to be consistent in its fight not only against ISIS*, but also against other international terrorist organizations, especially the East Turkistan Islamic Movement*, the Islamic Party of Turkestan* (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*), Jamaat Ansarullah* and Al Qaeda*, which pose a direct threat to Russia, China, and Central Asian countries.⁷²

A priority for Central Asian states is to prevent the spread of "extremist metastases" from Afghanistan to their territory.⁷³ At the same time, a number of Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) bordering Afghanistan are willing to engage in a dialogue with the Taliban*, while others (Tajikistan) take a tougher stance. The reason for Dushanbe's harder line is due to the close-knit ties between Tajikistan Tajiks and Afghan Tajiks. In addition, in Tajikistan, the Taliban's* ties with some extremist groups originating from Tajikistan, in particular Jamaat Ansarullah*, are also a cause for serious concern.

An important aspect of Russian-Chinese security cooperation in Afghanistan is assistance in protecting Central Asia from Afghan terrorists and extremist forces to ensure their own national security. After the Taliban* came to power, armed conflicts flared up along Afghanistan's borders with Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Iran; the two former cases, escalations became a regular development. As Russian and Chinese experts both noted, Moscow and Beijing should play a mediating role in reducing tensions between these states and prevent conflict escalation.

All of Afghanistan's neighboring states are partners of Russia and China, and without their collaboration Moscow and Beijing's efforts to combat terrorism in

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁷² Safranchuk N.A., Konarovskiy M.A., Machitidze G.G. et al. "Afghanistan After Regime Change: Domestic and International Uncertainty" // Eurasian Strategies, MGIMO Consulting. URL: <http://eurasian-strategies.ru/media/insights/afghanistan-posle-smeny-rezhima-vnutrennjaja-i-mezhdunarodnaja-neopredelennost/>

⁷³ Kazantsev A. "Interstate relations in Central Asia, in: Eurasia on the Edge: Managing Complexity" / Ed. by Grigoryev L. M., Lukyanov F., Safranchuk I., Bordachev T., Lukin A. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018. P. 197–212.

Afghanistan will not succeed. Central Asian member states of the CSTO have received security guarantees from Russia.⁷⁴ These countries do not object to Russia placing military bases on their territories: The 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, the Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, and several other military facilities are currently operating there. China does not provide de jure security guarantees to Central Asian countries, but all these states are jointly developing a strategy of to combat political and religious extremism and terrorism as part of the SCO.

Joint counterterrorist activities between Russia and China could become the main axis of regional cooperation in this area. The Russian Federation and the PRC should synchronize efforts to counter terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan and Central Asia both bilaterally and within the SCO. For example, it is possible to conduct joint exercises and create a unified register of Islamist terrorist and extremist organizations in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Russian and Chinese experts agree that Moscow and Beijing should coordinate the actions of regional players, primarily SCO members, to form a united front against terrorist forces. Currently, there are several dialogue mechanisms, such as the Regional Dialogue on Security in Afghanistan and the Dialogue of Foreign Ministers from Afghanistan's Neighboring Countries Plus Afghanistan. This mechanism could also include defense ministers and representatives of other agencies related to the fight against terrorism. In addition, Moscow and Beijing could use the Russia-China Plus model by inviting different countries, such as Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Arab states, along with Afghanistan. Within such a framework, a dialogue on specific counterterrorism issues is possible.

The SCO and the CSTO are the most important multilateral counterterrorism mechanisms in the region, but they have different functions. The CSTO is a military alliance with the capability of delivering strikes at terrorist organizations. The SCO does not have a military component, even though the SCO hosts joint exercises and has a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. However, the organization plays a special role in anti-terrorist activities. Combating terrorism requires a set of measures, including upgrading legislation and the judicial systems, tightening border control, shaping public opinion, developing network management, and improving intelligence gathering and sharing. Additionally, preventing terrorist threat escalation is rather important and includes social, religious, ethnic, and cultural policies, as well as improves the population's economic well-being. In all these areas, the SCO performs important functions.

On the one hand Russian - Chinese cooperation aims to enhance the capabilities of the SCO and CSTO in fighting terrorism and increasing the effectiveness of their efforts, but on the other hand, makes these platforms complementary functional elements of a comprehensive regional counterterrorism system. The two countries can facilitate better coordination and information exchange on counterterrorism between the organizations, allowing them to coordinate their response to serious security incidents in the region and to maintain daily communication.

⁷⁴ Kazantsev A., Medvedeva S., Safranchuk I. "Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia" // Journal of Eurasian Studies. 2021. Vol. 12. №. 1. p. 57–71.

Central Asian states recognize the importance of Russia and China in the region and seek to conduct an active dialogue with Moscow and Beijing, including within the SCO. Given the different positions of member states regarding the Taliban*, it may be difficult for Russia and China to coordinate their efforts on security issues in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the SCO, along with other formats, could become one of the key platforms for harmonizing approaches to straightening out of Afghanistan's issues.

CSTO leadership takes seriously the possible risk of Central Asia being invaded by terrorist groups from Afghan territory. At the May 16, 2022 CSTO Moscow Summit, all member states of the organization, especially Russia and the Central Asian nations, expressed deep concern over the security situation in Afghanistan, pointing out that the latter still poses a serious threat to Central Asian peace.⁷⁵ That is why the member states regularly hold military exercises under the auspices of Russia to prepare for a possible invasion of terrorist groups from Afghanistan. Russia's policy on building a dialogue with the Taliban* does not exclude Russia keeping real guarantees for the CSTO member states that their borders would be secured.

It is imperative to keep in mind that security cooperation is complicated by the hostility of some neighboring states, particularly Tajikistan, toward the Taliban*. Russia and China are developing military cooperation with Tajikistan and support Dushanbe in securing its national borders but are trying to avoid confrontation with the Taliban*. As noted by Russian experts, in the event of a military confrontation between the Taliban* and Tajikistan, Russia and China will not be able to take a neutral stance, and Russia will have to provide military support for Tajikistan as its CSTO ally.⁷⁶

The threats posed by Afghanistan to Central Asia have additionally manifested themselves in light of social instability in certain parts of the region. In January 2022, for example, there was mass unrest in Kazakhstan. In May 2022, more unrest broke out on the border of Tajikistan and Afghanistan in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, which escalated to armed clashes.⁷⁷ If Russia and China could contribute to state economic development in the region, this might reduce the risks of social tensions or civil unrest in the long run.

Stability in Central Asia also depends on combating drug trafficking along the so-called "northern route," which is closely interlinked with international terrorist finances. The flow of drugs from Afghanistan is a serious problem for neighboring countries, including Russia and China, and the fight against drug trafficking is an important part of Russian – Chinese security cooperation in Afghanistan.

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁷⁵ On May 16, "Moscow Hosted a Meeting of Heads of CSTO Member State on the Occasion of the Thirtieth Anniversary of Signing the Collective Security Treaty and the Twentieth Anniversary of CSTO Establishment". 16.05.2022.
URL: https://odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/v-moskve-16-maya-proydet-vstrecha-glav-gosudarstv-chlenov-odkb-posvyashchennaya-30-letiyu-podpisaniya/

⁷⁶ Panfilova V. "Tajikistan May Turn into a Hotbed of Tension" // Nezavisimaya gazeta. 12.05.2022.
URL: https://www.ng.ru/cis/2022-05-12/5_8434_tajikistan.html

⁷⁷ "Tajikistan Starts Anti-Terrorist Operation on Afghan Border" // ROSBUSINESSCONSULTING, JSC 18.05.2022.
URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/society/18/05/2022/6284c9db9a794762d087e00f>

It should be noted that the Taliban* is a good example of a leadership in Central Asia that combines social and political power with religious power. This will pose a serious threat to the countries of Central Asia, where a significant part of society is Muslim, and will potentially affect Russia and China, where many Muslims also reside. Particularly, the rise of Islamist groups in Afghanistan and Central Asia could affect the views of Uyghurs living in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and pose threats to the One Belt, One Road Initiative, which is depends on minimizing political risks in Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan.

From the moment they rose to power, the Taliban* has shown signs of mounting ideological radicalization. Russia and China need to maintain dialogue to develop a common position towards Afghanistan, including at the expert level. Russia and China cannot change the Taliban*, but they should continue to urge the Taliban* to pursue more moderate religious policies without turning to fundamentalism, and work to prevent the spread of Afghan religious and political ideas beyond the country's borders. Experts consider it expedient to increase Russian and Chinese efforts to support and enlist the moderate Taliban*, and to develop opportunities to influence the movement's policies in this way.

Moscow's and Beijing's assistance to Kabul in achieving stability is relevant since the internal political difficulties in Afghanistan will also create favorable conditions for the development of international terrorist organizations.

Joint Russian and Chinese influence can facilitate mediation in Afghanistan's ethnic and religious conflicts, helping the warring ethnic, tribal and sectarian groups in the country find some common ground.

Cooperation with Afghanistan should be built, emphasizing non-military means of support. There are no official statistics on Afghanistan's socio-economic development, but indirect estimates of the country's GDP indicate that it is below USD 20 billion. In such a situation, the social environment becomes fertile ground for spreading jihadist ideas.⁷⁸

In the winter of 2021-2022, the population of Afghanistan was seriously threatened by famine. The catastrophe was averted thanks to humanitarian aid from several countries (primarily neighboring states) and the UN, which provided assistance for nearly 20 million Afghans. Additionally, according to estimates by Save the Children, 50 percent of Afghans are undernourished, and mass starvation still threatens the country.⁷⁹ The situation is complicated by the fact that in June 2022 there was an earthquake in Afghanistan with a magnitude of 5.9. As a result of the natural disaster, more than 1,000 people perished, another 1,500 were wounded. 500 homes were destroyed.

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁷⁸ Kazantsev A.A. "International Networks of Jihadism: Central Asia, Caucasus, Middle East and Afghanistan": Monograph. MGIMO under the MFA of Russia, Institute for International Studies. Center for Studying the Problems of Central Asia and Afghanistan. – M.: MGIMO-University, 2020

⁷⁹ "Nearly 10 Million Children Hungry in Afghanistan, Says NGO" // Al Jazeera Media Network. 10.05.2022.
URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/10/nearly-10-million-children-go-hungry-in-afghanistan-says-ngo>

What Afghanistan currently needs to ensure domestic stability is economic assistance. Russia and China should continue to call upon the international community to provide more economic aid for Afghanistan; this is especially true of the United States. At the same time, as Chinese experts note, Russia and China could promote Afghanistan's regional economic cooperation integration, thus spur the development of trade relations between Kabul with neighboring states. Moscow and Beijing should help Kabul shape a favorable investment and business environment, establish rules and regulations, as well as create a suitable internal environment for the reconstruction and development of the Afghan economy. Russia and China are major economic powers. Moscow garnered a great experience in implementing various projects in Afghanistan in the days of the USSR.⁸⁰ Beijing has a huge investment potential and construction capacity, which predetermines significant prospects for its cooperation with Afghanistan in this area.

Russia and the PRC could improve the use of political, diplomatic, and economic methods, including joint humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. The two powers could also coordinate economic assistance for Afghanistan, provided by Central Asian countries through the instruments of the EAU, the One Belt, One Road Initiative, the SCO, the CSTO, the 5+1 format, etc.

⁸⁰ "History of USSR Participation in the Afghan Conflict" // TASS. 14.02.2019. URL: <https://tass.ru/info/6116588>

Assessing the Impact of the U.S. and Other External factors in Afghanistan

Russia and China are not the only players interested in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

U.S. influence in the regional situation remains significant. Russia and China do not welcome the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. This primarily concerns the troops of the United States and its allies, which is fraught with a sharp increase in confrontation levels between Russia and the PRC with the West. The U.S. declared Russia and China to be its strategic rivals and began promoting an Indo-Pacific strategy, aimed mainly at deterring Moscow and Beijing. Additionally, Washington has formed the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) alliance and the AUKUS defense alliance.

All things considered, maintaining U.S. military bases in and around Afghanistan means that the U.S. will have constant access to the region and direct areas which form Russia and China's strategic rear. Both states oppose U.S. attempts to establish new military bases in Central Asia, despite Washington's claims that the purpose of those bases would be combating security threats that emanate from Afghanistan. In particular, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has stated that Russia considers the deployment of any U.S. military infrastructure in Central Asia unacceptable.⁸¹ China shares Russia's fundamental vision on this issue. While Beijing has not made any official statements, China and other SCO members proposed that the American military contingent withdrawal from the territories of SCO states as far back as 2005.

The decline in U.S. activity opens a window of opportunity for Russia and China to increase their influence in the region. In this new environment, it will be difficult for the U.S. to conduct operations in Afghanistan⁸² with its own troops or with the active use of its own resources, yet this does not rule out them doing so through other states that play an important role in the region.

Washington is cautious about possible diplomatic recognition of the Taliban* government. In his speech on September 8, 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken outlined detailed U.S. demands to the Taliban*, including: allowing Afghan citizens and foreigners to leave the country safely, banning terrorists in Afghanistan, ensuring public access to humanitarian aid, respecting the fundamental rights of the Afghan people, rejecting repression, forming an inclusive government, etc.⁸³ The U.S. believes that the Taliban* violates Afghan women rights.

⁸¹ "Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Address During the Plenary Session at the Meeting of Afghanistan Neighboring States (Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan)", Tunxi, March 31, 2022 // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 31.03.2022. URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1807302/

⁸² Kazantsev A.A., Sergeev V.M. "The Crisis of US-Centered Globalization: Reasons, Trends, Scenarios" // MGIMO University Herald, 2020, vol. 13, No. 2, p. 40-69.

* This organization is banned in Russia.

⁸³ "Secretary Blinken's Ministerial with Allies and Partners on Afghanistan" // U.S. Department of State. 08.09.2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-ministerial-with-allies-and-partners-on-afghanistan/>

Washington mainly uses sanctions and bailout mechanisms to place economic pressure on the Taliban* government to influence domestic and foreign affairs in Kabul. On August 18, 2021, the U.S. froze USD 9.5 billion in assets of the Afghan Central Bank. On February 11, 2022, U.S. President Biden issued an executive order unfreezing USD 7 billion of those assets, half of which would be used for improving Afghanistan's humanitarian situation, whereas the other half would compensate victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks. The feasibility of power plants, roads and other infrastructure projects planned by Afghanistan and neighboring states depends on the U.S. lifting sanctions.

The withdrawal of the coalition troops from Afghanistan means that military instruments have ceased to dominate Washington's policy toward Afghanistan, however, the U.S. has not completely given up the possibility of military intervention in this country. On August 28, 2021, the U.S. dealt an airstrike by an unmanned aerial vehicle against the Afghan province of Nangarhar, and on August 29, 2021 against Kabul.

Washington also uses multilateral formats to solve Afghan-related issues; on September 8, 2021, the U.S. along with its allies and partners held a ministerial meeting on Afghanistan in Germany. Participants included representatives from Europe and North America (U.S., UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Norway, Canada), the Asia-Pacific region (Japan, Republic of Korea, Australia, India, Pakistan), the Middle East (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Turkey) and Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan), as well as the UN, EU, NATO and other international organizations.

From October 9 to October 10, 2021, the U.S. and the Taliban* held their first formal talks following U.S. withdrawal in Doha. They discussed the security of U.S. citizens in Afghanistan, counterterrorism, female representation in the Afghan government, U.S. humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, and a number of other issues. From November 27 to November 28, 2021, the Taliban* held a second round of talks with U.S. and EU delegations in Doha. The new U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan, Thomas West, led the U.S. delegation, which included State Department and Treasury Department officials. Since August 2021, the "augmented three" Afghanistan model has also become one of the main venues for U.S. interaction with the Taliban's* leadership.

Washington is also trying to maintain influence in Afghanistan through international institutions. To some extent, the U.S. contributes to Afghanistan's external security issues; the U.S. is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and has veto power over international resolutions related to Afghanistan. It is also a member of many agencies and institutions in the UN, also always has a vote on issues related to the country's situation.

On January 11, 2022, the UN decided to provide USD 4.4 billion in educational and medical assistance to Afghanistan as part of the Humanitarian Response Plan, and requested USD 600 million in aid for Afghan refugees. On the same day, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) pledged USD 308 million in

* This organization is banned in Russia.

emergency humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. Total U.S. aid to Afghanistan from October 2021 to January 2022 amounted to USD 782 million.⁸⁴

Understanding the strategic competition between the region's countries, the U.S. uses multilateral and bilateral mechanisms to form a multi-level Afghan alliance, granting itself the ability to have mass political, economic, military and social influence on the country. By maintaining such a regional position, the U.S. uses Afghanistan as leveraging geostrategic tool, as well as an important element in its relations with Russia, China, Iran, India, Pakistan and Central Asian states.

India and Pakistan are also among the key stakeholders whose interests in Afghanistan need to be taken into account. Pakistan's interests are more obvious: the two countries are divided by the Durand Line which has not been formally recognized by any Afghan government, and there is also a significant Pashtun community in Afghanistan. Pakistan also hopes to ensure a "deep strategic partnership" in case it ever has a confrontation with India. Finally, trade routes connecting Pakistan with Central Asia can be laid through Afghanistan. In recent years, Islamabad began to establish relations with Moscow, including within the SCO, and is building a strategic partnership with Beijing.

India's national security risks associated with Afghanistan is tied to the possibility of spreading instability and terrorism. According to a number of experts, Indian interests are largely articulated "contrary" to what actually is: New Delhi seeks to prevent Pakistan's geopolitical position from strengthening. In this context, India will support the Tajik community and other ethnic minorities in northern Afghanistan given their historic opposition to Pashtun domination.

Two middle powers, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), seek to advance their agenda in the region, including as part of their traditional standoff in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia supports Sunni groups, while Iran supports Shia groups. For example, the IRI actively supports the Hazaras in central and western Afghanistan. In particular, presumably with support of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), a militarized Hazara group Fatimiyun was created and is currently fighting in the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR).⁸⁵ In turn, the KSA supports some Sunni and anti-Shia groups, including certain radical groups.

In the long run, confrontations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as India and Pakistan could theoretically lead Afghanistan and its adjacent territories into a clash zone between Sunni and Shia proxy or ethnic groups (like the Pashtun against the northern ethnic minorities). In addition to seeking peaceful means in addressing regional disputes, preventing such a scenario is of vital interest to both Russia and China. The SCO, of which India, Pakistan and Iran are all members, could be one of the key tools to facilitate a peaceful dialogue.

The interests of another regional power, Turkey, are mainly confined to utilizing opportunities whenever available to exert its own influence. This includes

⁸⁴ Weitz R. "Afghanistan's Economy: Collapse and Chaos // Middle East Institute. 21.02.2022.
URL: <https://mei.edu/publications/afghanistans-economy-collapse-and-chaos>

⁸⁵ "Kirichenko V.P. Involvement of Afghanistan's Hazara in Syrian Conflict" // Russia and Muslim World. 2019, No. 4 (314), p. 70-78.

adopting an active foreign policy to resolve domestic political problems, as well as minimize migration risks; Ankara is faced with a powerful flow of refugees from Afghanistan passing through Iran.

After the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, Turkey adjusted its strategy and initiated new relations with the Taliban*. Turkish President Recep Erdogan seeks to establish a dialogue with the Taliban*, but he also maintains relations with the Uzbek minority which is traditionally quite hostile to the Pashtuns.

Ankara sees the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan as a strategic opportunity. Thus, on November 12, 2021, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan announced that Afghanistan could be included in the Organization of Turkic States in the future.

Qatar has played a special role in dealing with the Taliban*. In June 2013, Qatar allowed the Afghan Taliban* to open a Taliban* Political Office in Doha. The U.S. held meetings with the Taliban* using this office, and the parties signed an agreement in Doha on February 29, 2020.

After the withdrawal of U.S. troops, Qatar and Turkey helped Afghanistan reopen the Kabul airport, and Qatar became an important transit point for those who escaped Afghanistan. The U.S. moved its embassy in Afghanistan from Kabul to Doha, and in November 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken announced that the Qatari embassy in Kabul would serve as the U.S. diplomatic mission in Afghanistan. On March 10, 2022, Qatar was granted the status of Washington's main non-NATO ally due to its position in Afghanistan's affairs. It is the third Arab Gulf state to be granted such status, after Kuwait and Bahrain.

Pakistan, Turkey and Qatar work together in Afghanistan. There is also deepening cooperation between India, Israel and the UAE. Together with the U.S., the three countries formed the "Middle East Four" in October 2021, which was called the "I2U2 Group" at the first virtual summit of the four leaders in July 2022 during the war in Afghanistan. The UAE was the only Arab country to send its troops there. Former President Ashraf Ghani fled Afghanistan to the UAE in August 2021. On May 24, 2022, Afghanistan and the UAE signed an agreement for the UAE to operate Kabul International Airport.

Thus, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan has increased the influence of regional players, including Pakistan, Qatar, Iran and Turkey. Particularly, the role of Qatar and Turkey has noticeably increased, and now there is practically not a single Afghan related problem that does not require their involvement. Each of these nations has its own interests in Afghanistan, which do not always coincide with those of China and Russia. Moscow and Beijing need to consider the significant impact external factors may have in the situation in and around Afghanistan, as they interact with the Taliban* and try to avert threats to Russian and Chinese interests in Afghanistan, as well as in the neighboring states.

* This organization is banned in Russia.

Conclusion

While Afghanistan has managed to avoid worst-case security scenarios so far, there is little reason to be optimistic. Several external and internal factors continue to have a negative impact on Afghanistan's stability, including military and political challenges, the threat of terrorism, as well as social and economic problems.

The activities of Taliban's* political opponents, also fraught with security risks in the country, should be taken into consideration. The interests of Russia and China would best be served if Afghanistan maintains domestic political stability and unifies the Taliban* under the its more moderate wing.

International terrorist organizations continue to maintain their ground in Afghanistan. The possible spread of terrorist threats in Central Asia and in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is concerning to both Russia and China. It is advisable for Russia and China to expand their cooperation in combating the spread of terrorism and drug trafficking from Afghanistan, particularly through the SCO. In the meantime, it is worth keeping in mind that solving terrorism involves more than forceful counteraction and eliminating its consequences: a proactive approach to joint preventive work is important to quell possible threat outbursts. Particularly, expanding the level of intelligence data exchange seems like a promising method.

Additionally, Russia and China should call on the international community to help improve the socio-economic situation in Afghanistan, possibly reducing the risks of social tensions and limiting jihadists from spreading their ideology. Direct financial and humanitarian aid can help improve the situation in Afghanistan.

Security problems in Afghanistan should also be addressed through regional and global formats, such as the SCO, the CSTO and the UN. The active cooperation between Afghanistan's neighboring states with influential regional powers like Russia and China would be advantageous to solving Afghanistan's security issues.

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**RUSSIAN - CHINESE STRATEGIC COOPERATION TO ENSURE SECURITY
IN AFGHANISTAN FOLLOWING U.S. WITHDRAWAL**

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