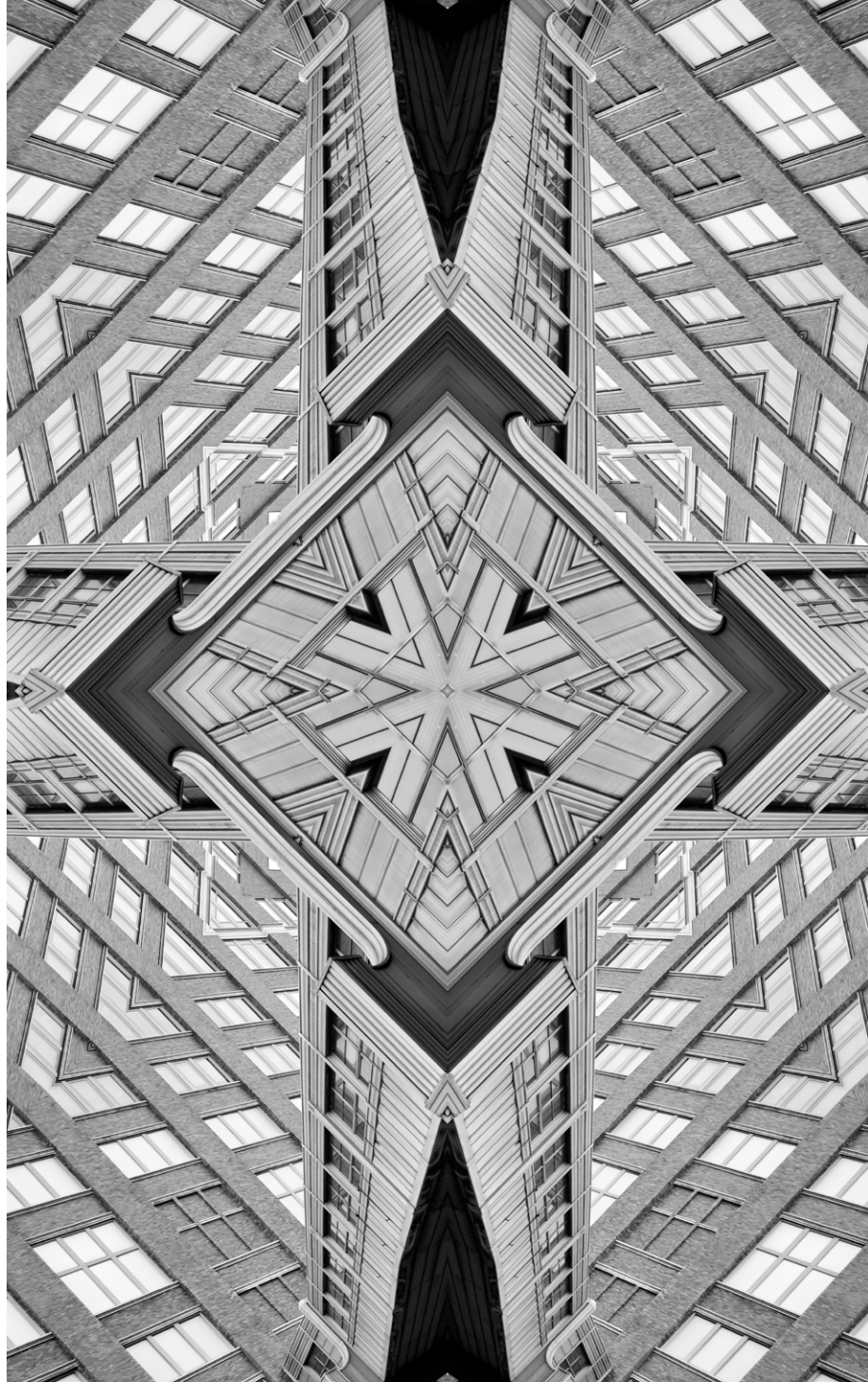


Issue

Brief

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China and Russia Navigate Shared Threat of Terrorism from Afghanistan

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Abstract

China and Russia both seek closer ties with the Taliban in Kabul, even as they have refrained from fully recognising the regime. This brief explores China's and Russia's converging interests in Afghanistan, and argues that their primary concern is a shared existential threat of terrorism from Afghanistan. Beijing and Moscow regard Afghanistan as a potential source of trans-regional instability, and they are adopting a pragmatic approach to contain the threat. The brief concludes that given the Taliban's ideological orientation and a long-standing relationship with terrorist groups, China and Russia will not be able to easily break the synergies between the Taliban and regional and global terrorism. They will have no option but to contain Afghanistan to thwart terrorism and protect their regional and global interests, mainly in Central Asia.

The US exit from Afghanistan in 2021 happened in parallel with the escalating US-China rivalry and the re-emergence of Russia as a counterbalancing power. Such parallels have prompted analysts to note an opportunity for the revisionist powers to fill the power vacuum in Afghanistan caused by the US withdrawal. The dominant Western narrative was that China and Russia would quickly establish and deepen their strategic footprints in Afghanistan to advance their regional hegemonic goals.¹ While commentators deemed the US withdrawal a boon for Moscow,² they anticipated Beijing's immediate economic and political interventions in post-US Afghanistan; Chinese experts and Taliban officials shared the same notion, too.^{3,4,5,6}

To be sure, Beijing and Moscow have had engagements with the Taliban at least since 2015. Changes in the global strategic landscape in recent years compel both countries to strengthen their respective relationships with Kabul. The question is what Afghanistan can offer to the strategic ambitions of both China and Moscow amidst a changing global order. Will Afghanistan be an added value in their respective spheres of influence, or is it a strategic vulnerability for their protective buffers in the surrounding regions?

As the international strategic landscape shifted when the war in Ukraine erupted, Afghanistan's potential geo-strategic implications have become an immediate common security concern for China and Russia. Both envision a more diverse and multipolar global order,⁷ and such arrangement makes Afghanistan and its current political order essential to their regional interests and anticipated spheres of influence. Instead of orchestrating long-term individual goals and interests, both Moscow and Beijing have converged on pursuing immediate strategic goals in Afghanistan. They are demonstrating strategic caution in engaging with the Taliban regime, and focusing on the threats from Afghanistan to the surrounding regions that serve as their economic and strategic spheres of influence in the emerging multipolar world.

This brief does not assume that China's and Russia's interests in Afghanistan are homogenous. However, Afghanistan's current political and security landscape induces immediate common threats for the two powers. Their long-term political and economic interests may differ, but their common goal is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a breeding ground for terrorism, which could threaten their strategic interests by destabilising Central Asia and

their respective peripheries. The evolving US-China and US-Russia rivalries augment the strategic significance of Central Asia. As a hub for other regions, including West Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia, Central Asia has unique geoeconomic importance for China's westward expansion and Russia's potential outreach to South Asia.

This brief examines Beijing's and Moscow's engagements with the Taliban insurgency and the government in Kabul during the US-led War on Terror; highlights what it finds as Beijing's and Moscow's more pragmatic and preemptive approach towards post-US Afghanistan; and argues that Afghanistan will remain a strategic vulnerability for China and Russia.

“As the global landscape shifted with the war in Ukraine, Afghanistan's potential geostrategic implications have become an immediate security concern for China and Russia.”

Beijing's and Moscow's Relationship with the Taliban Insurgency

During the two-decade-long War on Terror in Afghanistan, China and Russia largely remained observers. They refrained from active engagement in the counterterrorism, state-building, and reconstruction efforts although stability in Afghanistan directly served their interests.⁸

Freeriding on the international counterterrorism consensus,⁹ Beijing justified and heightened its oppressive domestic policies against its Muslim population.¹⁰ Furthermore, the overstretched financial and military investments of the US in Afghanistan allowed China to focus on expanding its economic and military power in different strategic regions.¹¹ In the case of Russia, the cooperative relationships between the Western counterterrorism coalition and Kremlin was confounded by various factors. While offering intelligence and logistical support,¹² albeit erratic, Moscow took advantage of the two-decade-long primacy of counterterrorism in the political and military doctrines of the Western powers. It diverted its focus on investing in and strengthening its security apparatus and military capabilities toward rising to the ranks of a global power.¹³

Meanwhile, China and Russia also refrained from further destabilising the fragile security situation by engaging with the Taliban and avoiding any covert or overt contacts with the Taliban insurgency. This changed when the US announced that it was tapering its involvement in the country by 2011.¹⁴ Beijing and Moscow then stepped up their involvement in Afghanistan. Beijing sought to undermine US presence in its backyard and expanded its political and economic footprints in Afghanistan. For Russia, the goal was pragmatic and selective: it wanted to explore the potential of establishing relationships with the Taliban insurgency that was then intensifying.

China's Ambitions

Aligned with its regional and global economic and political ambitions, Beijing reconsidered its limited engagement in Afghanistan. It intensified bilateral relations with the Afghan government and initiated contacts with the Taliban insurgency.¹⁵ In 2014, in parallel with increased official assistance to the Afghan government for the first time since 2002, Beijing sent out clandestine invitations to high Taliban officials.¹⁶ Among other reasons, the Afghan government leadership's outlook toward China might have shaped Beijing's increased dynamism in Afghanistan.¹⁷

Beijing's and Moscow's Relationship with the Taliban Insurgency

Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, the past two successive Afghan presidents (2002-2014 and 2014-2021), had both advocated for an active role for Beijing in the country. They entertained different strategic reasons, however. Karzai's geopolitical inspirations evolved after his relationship with the US turned sour later in his presidency. Inspired by Robert Kaplan's geopolitical analysis,¹⁸ Karzai wanted to transform Afghanistan's "cursed" geostrategic location into a "blessing" by facilitating multilateralism.¹⁹ He also anticipated Beijing as a counterbalancing force to the hegemonic US involvement in the country.²⁰ As such, it would have given the Afghan government more bargaining power.

Unlike his predecessor, Ghani's approach towards China was more pragmatic and inspired by the logic of geoeconomics. The image of Afghanistan that he tried to sell to Beijing was no longer that of a buffer for competing powers but a hub of regional connectivity and key to the integration of China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).²¹ Ghani wanted Beijing to increase its economic footprint in the country.²² Having strategic leverage over Pakistan, Beijing's economic stakes would enhance its interest in playing a more dynamic role in the Afghan peace process.

Unlike Karzai, who tried but failed to directly engage Pakistan in mitigating the Taliban insurgency, Ghani turned to Beijing. By increasing its economic stakes, Ghani asserted, Beijing would find it rational to exert its leverage over Pakistan to cease support to the insurgency.²³ To that end, Ghani realigned Afghanistan's foreign policy and accorded new importance to China.²⁴ He also sought to offer a stakeholder and transactional relationship with Beijing. His administration extradited Uyghur militants to China to motivate Beijing's active involvement in resolving the Afghan conflict.²⁵ China reciprocated, but cautiously. Beijing continued to avoid exerting pressure on Pakistan, while expanding its contacts with the Taliban. Beijing was cautious but determined to undermine the US's prospects in Afghanistan by moving closer to the Taliban.

In 2015, Beijing invited a Taliban delegation for secret talks.²⁶ It also facilitated securing concessions from the Afghan government to the insurgents by convincing it not to carry death sentences for high-profile Taliban insurgents, including a key Haqqani Network operative sentenced to death for his role in facilitating suicide bombings.²⁷ The start of the US-Taliban negotiations in 2018 prompted a new dynamism between Beijing and the Taliban. For Beijing, a post-US Afghanistan was turning into a reality.

Beijing's and Moscow's Relationship with the Taliban Insurgency

Russia's Stakes

Unlike that of Beijing, Moscow's role in the Afghan conflict had remained unappealing for all the involved stakeholders of the War on Terror. Washington considered Russia's engagement an issue with strategic complications.²⁸ By provoking memories of the loathed Soviet invasion, Kabul deemed Russia's direct engagement detrimental to the legitimacy of the international intervention. Nevertheless, the Afghan government welcomed Washington and Moscow's convergence on the legitimacy of counterterrorism and state-building initiatives in Afghanistan. In Kremlin, the overburdening costs of the Soviet invasion had remained a deterrent for any new Russian involvement in the country.²⁹

Moscow politically supported the NATO mission in Afghanistan and, on occasion, provided logistical and intelligence support, including opening its air space in 2009 to the US counterterrorism missions.³⁰ Excluding a brief clandestine contact with the Taliban in 2007 on illicit drugs flowing from Afghanistan to Russia via the Central Asian republics, Moscow remained supportive of the mission. The dynamics started changing around 2015.

The return of geopolitical tensions between Washington and Moscow that emerged in the Syrian conflict shifted Moscow's strategic posture from supporting the NATO mission in Afghanistan to undermining it by establishing contacts with the Taliban insurgency. Beijing and Moscow thus converged on a common aim of forcing the US out of Afghanistan. In 2015, Kremlin designated Afghanistan as one of its foreign policy priorities and initiated contacts with the Taliban.^{31,32}

The emergence of the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-K) in Afghanistan further inclined Moscow toward the Taliban and the two sides shared information on IS-K.³³ Moscow would soon arrange a high-level meeting on Afghanistan with China and Pakistan without inviting the Afghan government. The latter dubbed the conference "illegitimate" and accused Moscow of supporting the Taliban insurgency.³⁴ The Taliban welcomed the initiative and deemed it a potential anti-US alliance in the region.³⁵

Beijing's and Moscow's Relationship with the Taliban Insurgency

The start of the US—Taliban talks in 2018 gave the insurgency political legitimacy, which Beijing and Moscow used to their advantage by strengthening relationships with the Taliban and inviting them to various conferences, meetings, and closed-door diplomacy.³⁶ As the tensions between Washington and Moscow intensified, the US accused Moscow of providing arms to the Taliban.³⁷ Having geographic proximity to, and strategic interests in Afghanistan, Beijing and Moscow did not want to remain unengaged in post-US Afghanistan. Furthermore, the changing global geopolitical landscape characterised by increasing global powers' rivalries necessitated the two revisionist states' strategic manoeuvring in Afghanistan.

“The start of the US-Taliban negotiations in 2018 prompted a new dynamism between Beijing and the Taliban.”

The Post-U.S. Afghanistan: From Strategic Dilemma to Threat

Taliban reclaimed power in 2021 as the international political landscape shifted. China and Russia, as revisionist states to the US-led global liberal order, were considered the beneficiaries of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and were expected to fill the power vacuum in the country.³⁸ Analysts speculated that China would promptly exert its political and economic power in Afghanistan.³⁹ Even the Taliban were keen on leveraging the opportunity by offering Beijing an open-door to invest in the untapped vast natural resources of Afghanistan.⁴⁰ Russia has kept its diplomatic mission open in Kabul and was quick to talk warmly about the Taliban takeover.⁴¹ Given the rising conflict between the major powers, the Taliban expected Beijing and Moscow to recognise their regime.

Neither of them, however, rushed to an uncalculated embrace of the Taliban regime and instead adopted a dualistic approach. On the one hand, they have maintained selective engagement with Kabul, including accrediting the Taliban's diplomats,^{42,43} and refraining from antagonising the regime by criticising its policies, including banning girls from education.⁴⁴ At the same time, Beijing and Moscow are systematically operationalising their containment strategies. They appear to be responsive to the existential threat of terrorism from Afghanistan to Central Asia—their common strategic sphere of influence. They have initiated protective measures, including building military installations and capabilities in the region to contain the threat.

The duality in their approach toward the Taliban indicates Beijing's and Moscow's common immediate strategic concerns and defensive goals related to Afghanistan. Their shared concern is the inability or unwillingness of the Taliban regime to contain the growing threat of terrorism in the country. Before discussing further this threat, it is important to review the renewed significance of Afghanistan to Beijing's and Moscow's geostrategic calculus.

In the years before the rivalries between global powers intensified, Beijing and Moscow saw little strategic significance in Afghanistan; the war in Ukraine changed this calculation. Beijing and Moscow both see the ongoing crisis as the inevitable shift towards greater multipolarity in international relations,⁴⁵ requiring them to consolidate power in their respective spheres of influence and safeguard their protective buffers—this brings Afghanistan into their calculations.

The Post-U.S. Afghanistan: From Strategic Dilemma to Threat

Located at the crossroads of South, Central, and West Asia, Afghanistan offers a unique strategic hub for regional connectivity and integration. In addition to its vast untapped natural resources, the country offers benefits to Beijing, including its emerging economic integration with Western Asia/Persia and the Middle East. The emerging political and economic realities and dynamics in these regions reinforce Afghanistan's geostrategic significance.

For example, Afghanistan is crucial for different projects within the China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. After signing the US\$ 400-billion bilateral cooperation program, Iran announced two axillary trade corridors between Iran and Central Asian republics through Afghanistan—the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran (KTAI) and the Iran-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan corridors. The deal also aims to improve China's energy security by diversifying its oil-importing ports and reducing its dependency on the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca. The deal offers Beijing two ports in the Persian Gulf—i.e., Chabahar and a new oil terminal near the Jask port.⁴⁶ As China's access to these ports will be via land, Afghanistan can serve as a transit hub.

Southward, China is trying to turn around the highly troubled, US\$ 60-billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Among other initiatives, in-road infrastructure projects within the CPEC connect the Silk Road Economic Belt—BRI's Central Asian extension—with the Gwadar port in the Arabian Sea. Though the infrastructure and connectivity projects with Pakistan are not going through Afghanistan, its geographical proximity and political insecurity can easily jeopardise the viability of these projects. The US has opposed CPEC and is pressuring Pakistan to avoid falling prey to China's "debt trap" initiatives.⁴⁷ With the return of the Taliban to power, terrorist organisations, including Tehreek Taliban of Pakistan (TTP) and the IS-K, and the Baloch nationalist movements^a have intensified their attacks against Chinese interests in Pakistan, including against projects under CPEC.⁴⁸ The Baloch insurgency, fueled by inequities in resource distribution, is moving against China's exploitative practices such as land grabbing; its home is the Balochistan province, where the Gwadar Port is also located.⁴⁹

a It is an umbrella term used for the ongoing armed resistance by Baloch nationalist and religious groups that demand more autonomy in their homeland of Balochistan province in Pakistan. While the region is rich in natural resources, the province has remained the most deprived and poverty-stricken region of Pakistan.

The Post-U.S. Afghanistan: From Strategic Dilemma to Threat

While Moscow's immediate economic interests in Afghanistan are less pronounced, in its new foreign policy doctrine released in 2023 Kremlin envisions integrating Afghanistan into the Eurasian space.⁵⁰ Afghanistan offers Moscow potential strategic benefits in the long term. The energy geopolitics triggered by the war in Ukraine has revealed Kremlin's strategic vulnerabilities associated with the country's dependency on Western energy markets. Indeed, Russia is already pivoting to Asia, where South Asia, in particular, can open new horizons for the Russian energy sector. The region has already increased its sea-borne oil imports from Russia.⁵¹

In the long run, Afghanistan can serve as Russia's gateway to energy-starved South Asia through Central Asia. While it may be a long shot, such a prospect may be on the prism of strategists in Moscow. In 2023, Moscow declared its willingness to participate in the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project that is being planned to carry natural gas from Central Asia to the Indian subcontinent.⁵² Before the war in Ukraine, Russia, while deeming the project "interesting," did not appear keen to be part of the scheme due to security concerns.⁵³

However, materialising their economic interests in Afghanistan is not the immediate priority for either Beijing or Moscow, given the primacy of security concerns such as political instability and terrorism. While the Taliban would like to present Afghanistan as a mine of untapped natural wealth,⁵⁴ Beijing and Moscow have overriding concerns, at least for the time being.

“Their economic interest in Afghanistan is not the immediate priority for either Beijing or Moscow, given the primacy of security concerns.”

A Common Terrorism Threat

As China and Russia envision a multipolar world order, they are seeking to consolidate power in their respective spheres of influence. Factors related to Afghanistan—including geographic proximity, terrorism, and political instability—can jeopardise Beijing’s and Moscow’s regional interests and security. More specifically, the threat of terrorism is posed by groups determined to infiltrate Central Asia, including the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), IS-K, and al-Qaeda.

Beijing considers terrorism from Afghanistan a significant security threat to the region and the world, and has asked the Taliban to take tangible measures against terrorist groups.^{55,56,57} Similarly, Moscow has expressed concerns about the proliferation of jihadists from Afghanistan into the Central Asian republics.⁵⁸ In 2022, the Russian foreign minister claimed that IS-K, Jamaat Ansarullah, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) were using Afghanistan as a base from where it exports instability to Russia by destabilising Central Asian states.⁵⁹

Beijing and Moscow are seeking cooperation in securing their common interests.⁶⁰ Some analysts, however, are skeptical of the prospect of Beijing and Moscow cooperating on the issue of terrorism and Central Asia.⁶¹ Their divergent views impede cooperation, whether on engagement with India, their strategic goals in Central Asia, and their postures towards the Taliban. Yet, their differing stances on Central Asia does not imply a zero-sum power game. Unlike Western strategic doctrines, non-Western practices may not necessarily be based on rigid dichotomies. At least, the common threat of terrorism that Afghanistan poses to the strategic interests of the two countries in Central Asia can help promote synergy between their efforts. Second, both Beijing and Moscow envision a multipolar international order, which does not necessarily mean mutually exclusive strategic domains. On the contrary, there may exist overlapping strategic and economic imperatives and interests, including the issue of Afghanistan and terrorism, which can lead to synergies.⁶²

Since the return of the Taliban to power, both China and Russia have expanded their strategic footprints in the Central Asian republics. In addition to establishing military bases in Tajikistan,⁶³ China conducted joint military drills with Tajikistan near its border with Afghanistan.⁶⁴ In late 2022, both countries decided to carry out more anti-terrorism military exercises. Some observers speculated that this was an indication of Dushanbe keeping distance from Moscow towards Beijing.⁶⁵ Tajikistan has also conducted similar drills with

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the Russian military, the latest of which was in April of 2023.⁶⁶ This indicates that both Beijing and Moscow not only see terrorism as a common threat but appear committed to closer cooperation in tackling the threat and preventing it from spreading into Central Asia. Simultaneously, since the rise of the Taliban to power, terrorist groups, mainly IS-K, have infiltrated the northern regions of the country bordering Central Asia.⁶⁷

In the recent years, IS-K has intensified its online campaign and propaganda against Beijing's policies toward Uyghurs.⁶⁸ Simultaneously, the group launched attacks against Chinese and Russian interests and nationals in Afghanistan, including conducting a coordinated attack in February 2023 on a hotel in Kabul home to Chinese citizens.⁶⁹ IS-K also claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul on the day when a Chinese delegation was due to hold talks with the Taliban officials in the vicinity.⁷⁰ In September of 2022, a suicide attack on the Russian embassy in Kabul killed two Russian diplomats. The group has also ramped up the recruitment of operatives from Central Asian republics.⁷¹ The shift of IS-K from eastern Afghanistan to the country's northern regions brings strategic benefits to the organisation in terms of new recruitments from across the border in Central Asia. Having shared linguistic and ethnic backgrounds between residents of northern Afghanistan with people in the neighbouring Central Asian republics helps IS-K recruit and accommodate fighters from across the border.⁷²

At the same time, armed resistance to the Taliban regime is another cause of concern for Beijing and Moscow. This anti-Taliban armed resistance is comprised primarily of non-Pashtun ethnic groups operating in the Hindu Kush mountains. Though initially crushed by the Taliban in 2021,⁷³ the front has shown momentum in northern Afghanistan since 2022.⁷⁴ Indeed, the armed resistance could only likely grow further, given the Taliban's continued repressive policies, extrajudicial killings of former Afghan security personnel, ethnic subjugation, and the exclusion of religious and ethnic minorities. Some former Afghan security forces who face the threat of execution by the Taliban have joined the resistance force.⁷⁵

Territories where armed resistance is growing witness a power vacuum that could be filled by terrorist groups. Thus, the anti-Taliban armed resistance can destabilise Beijing's and Moscow's spheres of influence and protective buffers in the surrounding regions. The two countries have repeatedly reiterated the need for a political settlement by establishing a broad-based and inclusive government in Kabul, which will prevent the escalation of violence and terrorism.^{76,77}

A Common Terrorism Threat

The question is whether the dynamism in Beijing's and Moscow's respective relationships with the Taliban, will result in an end to the threat of terrorism. Beijing and Moscow have little trust in the Taliban's political will, and ability, to fight terrorism. For the Taliban, the test is moving against global and regional jihadist groups, including IS-K, al-Qaeda, IMU, TTP, and ETIM. Their domestic power dynamics, ideological orientation, and historical symbiotic relationships with regional and global terror networks will make it difficult for the Taliban to take an assertive anti-terrorism stance.

The killing of al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al Zawahiri in Kabul under Taliban protection and the increasing activities of TTP in Pakistan reinforce concerns about their will to disassociate with regional and global terrorism. The group's policies—including prohibiting girls from attending school and carrying out public executions—take Afghanistan back to the mid-1990s, when the Taliban first ruled the country.

Beijing and Moscow, therefore, would be taking a risk to rely on the Taliban regime to fight terrorism. Their immediate objective is not to configure Afghanistan into their respective spheres of influence. Rather, their relationship with the Taliban is a pragmatic and preemptive approach intended to contain the proliferation of destabilising factors emanating from Afghanistan. Co-opting the Taliban in regional diplomacy is not aimed at condoning the regime's draconian rule; rather, to prevent the proliferation of political violence, mainly terrorism, from Afghanistan.

The Taliban regime's stance on terrorism, however, has remained dubious. It has categorically denied the existence of foreign elements in the country, including those from Central Asia and the Uyghur militants,⁷⁸ while keeping their relationship with al-Qaeda.⁷⁹ The regime is also involved in a limited but brutal warfare against the local/Afghan elements of the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-K), even as there is no evidence to suggest that the Taliban targets foreign members of the organisation.⁸⁰ There is no trace of at least hundreds of IMU and ETIM fighters that the Taliban insurgency has resettled in Afghanistan in recent years.^{81,82} The IS-K is growing, contrary to the Taliban regime's claim of having uprooted the organisation.⁸³ Since 2022, elements of IS-K from the Central Asian republics has launched coordinated, high-value attacks in Afghanistan.⁸⁴

A Common Terrorism Threat

While China and Russia have chosen to co-opt the Taliban in diplomacy, the approach has yet to prove effective. Until the Taliban return to the mainstream and behave responsibly on the international stage, Beijing and Moscow will systematically turn to the only other alternative in dealing with the regime in Kabul: buffering Afghanistan by fortifying its borders with Central Asia and enhancing military presence and cooperation with the Central Asian republics.

“The Taliban has categorically denied the existence of foreign elements in the country, including those from Central Asia and the Uyghur militants, while keeping its relationship with al-Qaeda.”

Afghanistan has geoeconomic significance to both China's and Russia's regional and global ambitions. Its sheer strategic location makes it a potential transit hub for Beijing's westward expansion to Persia and the Middle East, and as a gateway to the South Asia where demand for Russian oil and gas is high. Moreover, Afghanistan sits on rich natural resources, including lithium and other rare-earth elements.


However, before configuring Afghanistan in their respective grand strategic calculus, Beijing and Moscow need to tackle the existential threats that the country poses to their regional and global interests. Terrorism and political violence in Afghanistan could destabilise China's and Russia's respective spheres of power in Central Asia. Since the return of the Taliban to power, terrorism has been increasing in scope and intensity. In addition, the Taliban has demonstrated no intentions to break up with global and regional terrorism, including al-Qaeda, IMU, ETIM, and TTP and indeed has maintained its symbiotic relationships with these networks. Moreover, the regime is systematically transitioning towards its core and fundamental draconian ideological orientation, which can further deepen and strengthen its cordial relationships with regional and global terrorist networks. The existing conducive environment that the Taliban regime facilitates for the jihadist networks carries strategic implications for Beijing and Moscow. The return of great-power competition further reinforces the seriousness of such threats for the two adjoining powers.

With the shift in the international political landscape towards a multipolar order, Beijing and Moscow are seeking to reimagine and consolidate their spheres of influence. The realignment increases Afghanistan's significance in the strategic calculus of both Beijing and Moscow, while at the same time, instability in Afghanistan increases the risks it poses to surrounding regions. Afghanistan has thus become a strategic dilemma for the two powers.

An uncalculated configuration of Afghanistan will intensify the proliferation and spillover of the associated threats beyond its borders. On the other hand, its complete isolation will alienate the Taliban regime closer to embracing global jihadist agendas. Beijing and Moscow have chosen the middle path of selective engagement, co-opting the Taliban in diplomatic and political processes to minimise the threats while avoiding full recognition of the regime.

Conclusion

The strategy seems unlikely to bring the regime in Kabul into the mainstream. Given their ideological orientation, history of symbiotic relationship with terrorism, and internal power dynamics, the Taliban find it hard to disassociate with jihadist groups and to change their ideological socialisation. Furthermore, selective engagement buys the terrorist networks time to operationalise and expand their jihadist agendas, as IS-K is extending its reach to the Central Asian republics.

In the medium and long run, Beijing and Moscow will have no choice with the Taliban regime in Kabul but to isolate and buffer Afghanistan. An interconnected but unstable and antagonistic Afghanistan located at the crossroads of critical regions will be more destabilising than a contained one. The two countries will invest more in protecting Central Asia from threats proliferating from Afghanistan. China has already fortified its tiny border with Afghanistan. The challenge for both Beijing and Moscow is securing the boundaries of the Central Asian republics with Afghanistan. Since the Taliban came to power, these republics have expressed concerns about their borders' security. Given the rough terrain, it is a challenge to make these borders impenetrable for cross-border threats, including terrorism. Afghanistan under the Taliban will remain a strategic threat for both Russia and China in the coming years. 

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