



Feature Article
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Afghanistan Is Still There

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Since the U.S.'s abrupt departure from Afghanistan, the Taliban government has opened extensive contacts with China, Russia, Pakistan, Turkey, and the Gulf States and some have elevated their ties to the ambassadorial level. No region has more at stake in Afghanistan's evolution than Central Asia and none follow developments there more closely. The U.S. should expand its C5+1 ties with Central Asia to include the sharing of information and discussion of policy choices regarding Afghanistan. Europe and other friendly powers should do likewise.

Over the two decades following the attack on the World Trade Center the United States lost nearly 2,500 soldiers and spent [more than \\$2 trillion](#) fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. Then the U.S. abruptly withdrew. America may have washed its hands of Afghanistan, but the country did not disappear. It is time for the United States to acknowledge this, and to address fresh chal-



lenges that are as yet acknowledged and unmet. Only this will advance America's long-term interests and prevent their being further eroded in a neglected but important world region.

The problem is not that Washington has done nothing. America's voice is prominent in the international choir opposing Taliban restrictions on women. Three senior Taliban officials have struggled to articulate an acceptable

response, but so far fallen have far short. What the State Department terms “pragmatic engagement” combines non-recognition, sanctions, and over-the-horizon monitoring of terrorist activities on Afghan soil, with the provision through third parties of aid to the fifteen million Afghans who, according to the United Nations’ World Food Program, don’t know where their next meal will come from. Washington also refuses to return the seven billion dollar of frozen Afghan assets in American banks until the main women’s issues are resolved. It meanwhile devotes the interest on these funds to humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and to defraying the cost of lawsuits against the Taliban government.

Such an approach falls short, not because it does too little but because it does nothing either to deter our enemies or strengthen our friends. Its altruistic goals are laudable but insufficiently strategic. What is needed is a targeted strategy that addresses the dangers posed by the actions of China and Russia and takes cognizance of carefully calculated steps taken by Afghanistan’s regional neighbors. Only such a targeted approach will bring advance America’s interests and those of its regional friends and deter global powers that aspire to control the heart of Asia.

Taliban control is strong enough to prevent outright rebellion, but the mullahs’ posture on the reassembling of terrorist groups on Afghan

territory is a more complex story. Christy Abizaid, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, claims that Al Qaeda is unlikely to revive because it no longer enjoys an “accommodating local environment.” Even if this is true, there remain several other groups, notably the Islamic State-Khorasan, which claimed credit for the Crocus City Hall tragedy in Moscow and also a cross-border attack on Iran that killed 84 people. It is hard to believe that Afghanistan’s Taliban rulers are ignorant of these groups, but their ignorance would be as damning as their awareness.

The Taliban may not face imminent rebellion but they know they must deliver tangible improvements to the citizenry. True, their supreme leader, an Islamic scholar based in Kandahar, brushes off popular challenges to their rule. But officials in Kabul know otherwise. They realize that information continues to flow into and out of the country, that many businessmen have their own sources of news, and that many of the several million Afghan emigres are working full time to bring about their downfall. If they don’t deliver improvements they are done for. Many parts of the country are peaceful today simply because the Taliban no longer attacks their farms and towns. But this era of respite will soon pass and expectations of progress will mount. In responding, the Taliban rulers have placed a large bet on a single mega-project, the 174-mile long Qosh Tepa canal. This vast and poorly engineered initiative promises to bring water to vast swaths

of arid northwest Afghanistan. But because this is the same water from the Amu Darya River that supplies farms in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, it has inflated tensions with their neighbors in Central Asia.

Russia, China, and Other Major Players

Meanwhile, two powers that are hostile to America are working hard to fill the vacuum left by America's departure: China and Russia.

Russians today view the Soviet army's 1988-1989 retreat from Afghanistan with as deep a sense of humiliation as Americans view their own withdrawal from the country. Citing the Taliban's treatment of women, Moscow does not exchange ambassadors with Kabul, but this is mere window dressing. The Afghan *chargé d'affaires* in Moscow functions virtually as an ambassador, as does the Russian counterpart in Kabul. Senior Taliban officials regularly visit Moscow, while Putin's government helps Russian businesses to invest in Afghanistan, forges new security links, and expands its intelligence operations there. All this is easier because Russia, in addition to its Kabul embassy, maintains a large and well-staffed cultural center in Kabul, with branches elsewhere.

One might have expected that the Islamic State's March 22 attack on the Crocus concert venue outside Moscow, in which 145 were killed, would have soured Russia-Taliban relations. However, Moscow chose to ignore the Taliban's failure to stamp out the Islamic State-

Khorasan on its territory and instead proposed an anti-extremist coalition with the Taliban themselves. If this rapport develops further, Russia will seek to enroll Afghanistan into its Eurasian Economic Union. In the meantime, Putin's government has redoubled efforts to open a railroad line between southern Russia and the Iranian port at Chabahar. This corridor, conceived during the America's presence in Afghanistan, avoids that country, but Russia is now pressing Kabul to link it with the Afghan rail system. Tensions between Sunni Afghanistan and Shiite Iran may slow this process but Kabul's need to satisfy the demands of businessmen in its western city of Herat will result in a deal.

Years of fighting Afghan Islamists and its own Muslims in Xinjiang handicapped China when it decided to open contact with the Taliban. To put these issues behind them Beijing adopted what it terms "three respects." These include respect for Afghan independence and territorial integrity, for choices made by the Afghan people and, significantly, the Afghans' religious beliefs.

Given Beijing's brutal treatment of its own Uyghurs, Taliban leaders have reason to question these resolutions. But they are impressed by the 11-point agenda China released in April, 2023, which ignores human rights issues and ballyhoos the fact that Beijing is Afghanistan's largest trading partner and provides more aid than any other country.

In February, 2024 China became the first country to accredit an ambassador from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Others will follow suit. This breakthrough came amidst a flurry of new Chinese projects, including direct flights from Beijing to Kabul and hundreds of scholarships for Afghan students who were left high and dry when the U.S. abandoned the newly built campus of the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul. Like Russia, China has concluded that the Taliban are committed to wiping out Islamic terrorists operating from its territory, and on 7 May Moscow announce that the Taliban leadership posed "no problem" for Russia.

The fact that western China is remote from major ports has given special impetus to Beijing's effort to open a railroad link from Xinjiang to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan. This China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has proven to be more attractive in theory than practice. Plans for a rail line from Kashgar to Peshawar in Pakistan have been drafted, but face insurmountable challenges in the form of long tunnels and staggering costs. Beijing's fallback position is to participate in the financing of an Uzbek project for a railroad from the Uzbek city of Termez to Peshawar, whence goods could proceed along the new China-built line to Gwadar. This initiative is in direct competition with Russia's developing route through Azerbaijan and Iran to the Iranian port of Chabahar. Both projects are beset by unanticipated problems and remain many years from completion.

But Afghanistan and all its neighbors in Central Asia need them. The problem is that they lack any power to influence their design and use. In their present form both projects advance the interests of China and Russia more than those of Afghanistan and the rest of Central Asia.

A paramount Chinese commercial interest in Afghanistan has always been in mining. In April, 2024 the Taliban announced that a Chinese firm was prepared to invest \$10 billion and hire tens of thousands of Afghans to mine lithium. This may have been a bluff, since a Saudi Arabian firm was negotiating for the same project. More to the point are the renewed negotiations between the Taliban rulers and the China Metallurgical Group Corp to mine the vast copper deposits at Mes Aynak. During the waning days of Ashraf Ghani's government international protests over the destruction of Buddhist monuments on the site and Taliban attacks on Chinese personnel stopped this project. But with the Taliban now in power and protecting the site, and with the Chinese and Taliban both claiming that they are committed to cultural preservation there, work will go forward. The proposed railroad from Kabul to Peshawar will bring the ore to market.

Kabul's Muslim Friends and Others

The Taliban's Sunni Muslim identity posed a challenge to the Chinese but an opportunity to Muslim states in the Persian Gulf region. Deftly playing the religious card, the Saudis, United

Arab Emirates, and Qatar have established themselves as the financial and banking centers for Afghan development. Qatar in particular benefits from the fact that Taliban political leader Abdul Ghani Baradar spent years in Doha before returning to Kabul. Building on relationships with Afghan businessmen developed during the years of America's presence in Afghanistan, and with the benefit of their compatible religious beliefs, these Middle Easterners are rising stars in Afghan development.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkiye also benefits from its Muslim affinity with Afghanistan, but has difficulty extending its current embrace of Turkic Central Asia to the Persianate Farsi and Dari speakers of Afghanistan. In spite of this, following the Taliban takeover Erdogan was quick to send emergency assistance and cultural and religious missions to Afghanistan. Turkish businessmen are rebuilding their once formidable position in the country by rebuilding the Kabul airport, which they originally constructed. They have also mounted a \$160 million project to rebuild the American-built Kajaki dam on the Helmand River. In contrast to this, deep religious and political tensions persist between the Taliban and Pakistan, in spite of the fact that both are Muslim nations. Islamabad's forced repatriation to Afghanistan of Taliban forces and other refugees, its bloody campaign against Balochi separatists, and its cross-border assaults on Afghan territory in March 2024, have all fanned tensions. However,

the fact that some Pakistani officials still see Afghanistan as a potential hedge in their conflict with India, and that the Afghans urgently need a link to Pakistan's port on the Arabian Sea reduces tensions on both sides. China has presented itself in the role of mediator.

Afghanistan's Central Asian Neighbors

In considering its posture towards Afghanistan, America has failed to grasp the importance of intimate links between Afghanistan and Central Asia and the impact of its Afghan policy on both.

Throughout the Soviet Kremlin leaders and their minions in Central Asia viewed Afghanistan as a land by religious fanatics and alien to modernity. Such disdain continued after the collapse of the USSR when Afghans ran the drug trade and attempted to kill at least one Central Asian president. Only with the arrival of Americans in Kabul did Central Asians' view of Afghanistan change for the better. Cultural contacts expanded and cross-border trade renewed. The World Bank worked with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to devise a plan (CASA-1000) to transmit hydroelectric power through Afghanistan to consumers in Pakistan. Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India revived a dormant plan (TAPI) to send gas across Afghanistan to Pakistan and India, and the Turkmen agreed to build gas-fueled fertilizer plants along the way to benefit the local populace. Uzbekistan constructed a railroad from Termez to the Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif

and planned further rail lines to Herat, Kabul, and Peshawar. And Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan proposed a “Lapis Lazuli corridor” extending from the Caucasus to Kabul.

The U.S. departure suspended these projects, but today they are again under consideration. However, a fundamental and significant change has occurred. Across Central Asia such practical initiatives are no longer viewed merely as ways to boost the national economies but as strategic keys to the protection of Central Asian sovereignties themselves. Russia’s war on Ukraine, Putin’s crude threats against Kazakhstan and blackmail of other regional states, combined with China’s sometimes overwhelming regional projects and tightening embrace, leave Central Asians, and peoples of the Caucasus as well, gasping for air. They have all concluded that windows to and through Afghanistan are the best way to balance and manage pressures from Russia and China. Indeed, they see such transport openings as essential to the preservation of their independence.

Undergirding such thinking is the dramatic reconceptualization of their region that all Central Asian countries have embraced. In the early years after independence, inward-looking policies enabled them all to survive the birth pangs of their new sovereignties. However, this came at the price of reduced trade and other forms of interaction among them. Now, by contrast, they embrace the fact that for

thousands of years they have belonged to a single cultural zone and market which had always included Afghanistan. In this “new” and expanded Central Asia the differences between Turkic and Persianate peoples and languages is seen as less significant than the commonalities that define their shared identity. With the return of Taliban rule in Kabul the Central Asians are eager to reembrace populous Afghanistan as a full member of their region.

Thus, economic motives and cultural affinities combine to give Taliban-ruled Afghanistan an important role in Central Asia and the Central Asian peoples a unique status in Afghanistan. The Central Asians treat their charges d’affaires from Kabul as full ambassadors and all are expanding trade with their southern neighbor. Last year Kazakhstan’s trade with Afghanistan reached \$1.5 billion and is expected to double in 2024. The new spirit is improving many interactions. When the Taliban’s Qosh Tepa canal project threatened to cripple Uzbek agriculture and pose an existential threat to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan’s president, Shafkat Mirziyoyev, rather than railing against the Taliban, invited them to join the other riparian states in the management of the Amu Darya’s water.

On this and other issues pertaining to Afghanistan the five Central Asian countries, joined by Azerbaijan, are all in full agreement. Indeed, the recognition of their common interests with Afghanistan has played a significant role in the

growing acceptance of Central Asia as a world region, and in the slow but steady development of region-wide consultative institutions. All are poised to send full ambassadors to Kabul as soon as their western partners lift their policy of non-recognition. Meanwhile, Central Asians are closely following developments within Afghanistan. Ethnic and linguistic links facilitate this process and have led to the Central Asia countries emergence as arguably the best “eyes and ears” on Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. All these developments the U.S. has failed to grasp and integrate into its strategizing,

An Afghan Strategy for America

Washington, preoccupied with Ukraine, Russia, Iran, Israel, China, and Taiwan, can scarcely be expected to focus on Afghanistan, which has receded to the periphery of its concerns. Paradoxically, it is now the Taliban themselves who seek to expand relations, and not just to get at their frozen assets. But from an American perspective, the value of engagement with Kabul are by no means clear while the pitfalls of such a step seem obvious. At the same time, America’s post-disengagement strategy has unsettled a volatile region, vexing America’s friends and cheering its enemies. The departure left Afghans to the tender ministrations of China and Russia, which aspire to control the entire region, and diminished Washington in the eyes of many. It also handed the two alien powers access to important

American military assets and to valuable mineral resources that had been identified and mapped by the U.S. Geological Survey.

Even if Washington is unlikely to deal with the Taliban government for some time, can it at least adopt a more targeted strategy towards the country, one that grasps the complex evolutions taking place there, that acknowledges the new perspectives and possibilities of Afghanistan’s Central Asian neighbors, and addresses—if only indirectly—the vigorous efforts by China and Russia to assert themselves as arbiters of Afghan affairs and the entire region?

For both practical and existential reasons the five former Soviet republics are all actively engaging with Kabul, even as they maintain a prudent wariness. In the process of these interactions they have developed impressive expertise. Typical of these regional authorities on Afghan affairs is Ismatulla Irgasahev, Uzbekistan’s special representative for Afghanistan. Like his other Central Asian counterparts, Irgashev commands several key languages and boasts a wide range of contacts from Kandahar to Herat. Such people should be heard from if the U.S. to appreciate the continuing stakes in Afghanistan and the most effective way addressing them.

The most efficient and effective means of developing a more targeted and effective approach to an evolving Afghanistan is through closer interaction with Afghanistan’s neighbors north

of the Amu Darya. This makes sense because on a growing number of issues the views of Central Asia's governments mesh with those of Washington. Such discussions can take place through a new process or, better, through the existing C5+1 and B5+1 structures. However, for this to happen Washington must first abandon its Soviet-era definition of Central Asia as only the five states formerly ruled from Moscow and open its structures of consultations to others in the region whom the Central Asians now consider part of their region and with whom they are intensively interacting. The prime candidate for such an addition to the C5+1 process is Azerbaijan. It is nearly impossible to imagine that Afghanistan's current rulers will ever meeting the standards of mutual trust, practical competence, and close interaction with America and the West that prevails among the existing five Central Asian governments. Nevertheless, Afghanistan should not be excluded in principle, if only because the aspiration for such a status would be a force for change in Kabul, whether it is ruled by the Taliban by a successor government. The ball is in Kabul's court!

As part of this region-based approach to Afghanistan, Washington should look sympathetically at initiatives launched by C5+1 members, including the four transport projects mentioned above. In doing so it should remember that as recently as 2019 the State Department issued a new Strategy for Central Asia that focused on transport ties through Afghanistan

and specifically endorsed both CASA-1000 and the Lapis Lazuli corridor. However, Washington need not support such projects financially, since the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and Islamic Development Bank have all indicated their readiness to reengage with Afghanistan once the Taliban have met basic conditions. Moreover, Washington should put Afghanistan on the agenda of its interaction with Gulf State financiers, who are rapidly expanding their engagement with Kabul. And it should point out to its allies in Tokyo, Seoul, and Ankara the potential benefits to them as well. Some have argued that such initiatives will mainly benefit the Taliban. But to the extent that expanded trade with Central Asia helps the Afghan economy, it will also help alleviate the grinding poverty into which thirty-seven million Afghans were plunged by America's abrupt withdrawal. It will also benefit the country's remaining and now struggling independent business class and small enterprises.

Nor should sympathy towards the Central Asians' Afghanistan-related initiatives be seen as a back-door path to help the Taliban or to extend diplomatic recognition to their government. Rather, such initiatives should be seen as a way to test Taliban intentions, their ability to evolve, their readiness to honor agreements, and their commitment to the welfare of the Afghan people. Lacking such engagement with the Central Asians, Washington and Europe will be dependent on their own intelligence agencies, which have proven to be inadequate

in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and on less well-informed accounts from the thirty-four countries that are already interacting with the Taliban.

The Cost of Inaction

There are serious reasons for the United States to continue its present stand-off approach to Afghanistan. Paramount among them are the claims on Washington's attention arising from ominous recent actions by China, Russia, and Iran. However, these factors must be weighed against the cost of inaction. It is therefore useful to review some of these and to indicate their relationship to the paramount challenges facing America and its friends globally.

First, inaction will decisively shift Afghanistan into the orbits of China, Russia, or both. In due course it will be drawn into Beijing's Shanghai Cooperation Organization and into Russia's flagging but tenacious Eurasian Economic Union, not to mention BRICS. Such developments would lead to an authoritarian concert in the broader region, hostile to America.

Second, it will result in the Taliban's full embrace of the authoritarian superpowers' model of development. Unable to resist this, Kabul's Muslim friends in the Gulf States and elsewhere will accommodate themselves to it. This will greatly advance the efforts by Beijing's and Moscow to create a solid band of statist and authoritarian regimes extending from the East China Sea to the Gulf, a

goal they have already advanced through ties with Iran and Pakistan.

Third, it will severely thwart the effort by Afghanistan's neighbors in Central Asia to steer an independent course, balancing the pressures and possibilities arising from Moscow and Beijing with those from more open societies in Europe and Asia. At best, they will become an isolated and steadily eroding island of relative openness in a sea of authoritarian states. This process will go forward also in the three states of the South Caucasus--Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, albeit it at a slower pace.

Fourth, it will prevent the Central Asians from promoting their own regional program, which emphatically includes Afghanistan, and will block the growth of a new regional identity and the expansion of Central Asia as an emerging world region. Instead, it will condemn these regional states to playing minor roles in an emerging authoritarian commonwealth and to form political and economic ties on that basis.

Fifth, it will validate and redouble Moscow's traditional penchant to "divide and conquer" Central Asia's sovereign states, including Afghanistan itself.

Sixth, it will thwart any future effort by a burgeoning and democratic India to play a constructive and balancing role in Afghanistan or Central Asia as a whole.

And, seventh, it will redouble efforts by both the Chinese and Russians to exclude the United States and its friends from any future Afghanistan and from the Central Asian region as a whole.

Because these issues directly involve America's main global adversaries, they cannot be brushed off lightly. However, it is possible to address them, not by acting alone or through costly programs, which are out of the question, but by supporting the regionwide efforts of Afghanistan's neighbors in Central Asia and by working in consort with them. This focused approach does not call for confrontation with America's global foes but it does call for balancing their actions with the emerging regional dialogue being promoted by Afghanistan's

neighbors. Nor, it should be stressed, does it seek to prevent Russia, China, or anyone else from engaging constructively with the Taliban. But it would prompt them to recognize that Afghanistan, poor as it is, can yet become part of a larger Central Asia that is fast developing a modern economy, more open political structures, and the capacity to speak as a world region. Afghanistan is still there, and the most effective way for the United States to respond to this reality is not through some splendid isolation but by cooperating and coordinating with Afghanistan's neighbors in the region of which it is a part.

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