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Russia and the Taliban takeover

The collapse of the Afghan government on August 15th, 2021 prompted intense discussions about the decline of the West and the rise of China and Russia, two actors seen as winning from the Taliban takeover¹. At the same time, there were perspectives that claimed that China and Russia are now entering an unknown and dangerous situation in Central Asia as the Western presence is diminished². In either case, these two states, and in fact all third parties to the civil war in Afghanistan, have had to adapt to the new realities on the ground, both in operational terms inside the country and in terms of diplomacy. Indeed, the US withdrawal and the Taliban takeover has required third actors recalibrate their Afghanistan policies.

Russia emerged from the August 15th takeover well-positioned to gain new leverage from its subsequent Afghanistan moves, such as not closing its Kabul embassy, calling for mediation between the Taliban and the opposition, and lambasting the United States for its failures in that country. In spite of the new circumstances, these and other moves are not unprecedented: there is both change and continuity. On the one hand, Moscow's perception of Afghanistan as a potential source of threats for itself and its Central Asian neighbors remains the same. It has been a long-term goal of Russia's Afghanistan policy to secure the southern flank of the successor Central Asian states. This is unlikely to change as long as Moscow continues to regard Afghanistan as a source of instability. On the other hand, the recent events amount to a dramatic change in circumstance for Moscow's Afghanistan policy. Indeed, since the 2001 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan started, Moscow centered much of its Afghanistan diplomacy on negotiating with the United States and NATO. Today, there is little left of their presence in that country. As of writing, the UN Afghanistan mission left the country, and the US and all European embassies have closed in Kabul. Since the Taliban began to gain ground in the summer of 2021, Moscow has had to adjust its approach to Afghanistan.

This paper argues that Russia's Afghanistan policy after the August 15th takeover walks on a tightrope as Moscow's scope for action is limited. As the following will show, Moscow would prefer the Taliban to consolidate power because it sees the group as a potential guarantor of stability in Afghanistan. This is perceptible from the moves and rhetoric used by the Russian diplomacy regarding both the Taliban and other third parties. Yet, at the same time, Moscow cannot become a direct backer of the Taliban. There are important caveats towards recognizing the group as the Afghan government or backing the group directly. Doing so would go against Moscow's reputation as a fighter against international terrorism and risk alienating some of its Central Asian allies. Crucially, however, Russia's Afghanistan agenda is

¹ Sabine Fischer, "Afghanistan: The West Failed, Win for China and Russia?" *SWP Comment*, n° 50, September 2021.

² Adam Weinstein, "China and Russia Did Not Win in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, 20 August 2021.

different from its Taliban agenda, meaning that engagement with the Taliban is preferable but not essential to achieving its objectives in the country. The outcome is that Moscow is interested in the Taliban for the security assurances they can provide, not in the group itself.

This report offers a chronological and synchronic analysis of the August 15th, 2021 juncture for Moscow, with reflections about what is next. It proceeds by placing Russia's initiatives in this crisis in their broader historic and strategic contexts. The last section is dedicated to Russia's reactions to the Taliban takeover. To close, the report addresses what is next for Russia in Afghanistan.

1. Separating Russia's Afghanistan and Taliban policies

History is a useful starting point to approach Russia-Afghanistan relations, offering perspective on their evolution. Proximity rather than distance has shaped these relations as Russia bordered Afghanistan for well over a century by the time of the 1989 Soviet withdrawal. This proximity was often violent, frequently peaceful, and inevitably influenced both countries. Much of the literature on Russo-Afghan interactions in the 19th century has hinged on the idea of the "Great Game", the imperial competition between Britain and Russia over hegemony in Central and South Asia. This reading of history remains influential but it has been criticized as a romantic reconstruction of what happened at the time³. Imperial encounters were more of haphazard and featured Central and South Asian actors more prominently than is frequently told. There was little scope to implement grand imperial schemes in this context. Indeed, imperial expansion or withdrawal was driven less by policy or ambitions than by circumstances and immediate junctures.

Afghanistan's proximity to Russia has long-term relevance not because of great power politics, but because Russia contributed to Afghanistan's entry into the modern state system, namely by being the power that shaped Afghanistan's northern border, the one that has remained the least contested since its definition⁴. The northeast border with Russia was defined in 1873 and the northwest border in 1888, a much shorter timeframe than the decades-long Afghan-British border delineation⁵. Evidence of the junctural nature of these boundary definitions is that other paths were possible. Several Tsarist generals advanced plans to divide and incorporate segments of Afghanistan into Russia's Turkestan⁶. Behind such plans was a security concern about the porous Afghan border⁷, which made Afghanistan into a meeting point for movements opposed to the Tsar in Central Asia, which in turn invited foreign intervention. The strategic value of Afghanistan was clear, as a Russia

³ The best known articulation [The Legend of the Great Game](#) is M. Liise Ma Kedourie Memorial Lecture, 2001. A more recent and detailed view of the narrative focused on the second Anglo-Afghan war is found in Alexander Morris [Beyond the 'Great Game': Origins of the Second Anglo-Afghan War](#) *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 3, n° 51, 2017.

⁴ As addressed below, Afghanistan does not recognize the Durand Line that divides it from the Pashtun populations in Pakistan. [The Durand Line: History and Problems of the Afghan-Pakistan Border](#), vol. 2, n° 40, 2009).

⁵ The southern border of Afghanistan was delineated between 1872 and 1935 (Michel Bruneau, [Š q Ò ~ i æ • ã ^ È Á Ô \[} c ã g i e u y p r o f e Á P a f i s , C N R S É d i t i o n s , 2 0 1 8 , p . 2 4 9 \) .](#)

⁶ Alex Marshall, *The Russian General Staff and Asia, 1860-1917*, Routledge, 2006, p. 138.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

officer said “[Afghanistan is] a shelter for German military instructors from the Turkish army dreaming of turning Afghanistan into a new Japan for [Russia]’s military progress”. So, more than great political maneuvers, security and strategic concerns drove the Tsar’s Afghanistan policy, a pattern that would persist thereafter.

The Soviet era did not change this trend. In fact, engagements between Moscow and Kabul were intensive as early as in 1919, when the Bolsheviks recognized the Afghan government of the time⁹. Some aspirations shifted, such as the initial impetus to have Afghanistan become the “springboard” of revolution to the south. But even then, security was a chief concern as Moscow asked Kabul for assurances about the exiles and Afghanistan-based groups that dissented Bolshevik rule over Central Asia¹⁰. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, launched in 1979 to protect the fledgling Socialist regime in Kabul, did not modify this perspective in the long term. Indeed, one lesson that Russia drew from the Soviet invasion and its failure was not to invest in a specific regime in Afghanistan. Instead, pragmatism regarding Afghan and international interlocutors would once again become a key feature of Russia’s Afghanistan policy. For instance, after years of demanding international acquiescence to its presence in Afghanistan, the USSR called for UN and international cooperation on the country after its 1989 withdrawal¹¹.

The Soviet collapse rearranged priorities for Moscow in Afghanistan but did not fundamentally alter its policy towards that country. On the one hand, for the first time in over a century, there was no shared border with Afghanistan for Moscow. The security threats perceived from Afghanistan were therefore less pressing. On the other hand, this new physical separation can be overstated. The distance between Kabul and Moscow is similar to that between Panama City and Washington. Consequently, Russia has remained interested in Afghanistan and has continued to regard that country as important for its own security. This has led to what I call Moscow’s policy of “containment” in Afghanistan¹². Even after 1989, Moscow remained engaged in Afghan matters through direct relations with the parties to the conflict and the post-2001 Kabul government. Similarly, Russia has been involved in international diplomatic initiatives regarding Afghanistan, notably the 2001 Bonn Conference, with its own Moscow format negotiations later on. Parallel to this diplomatic work, Moscow defends the former Soviet border with Afghanistan, most notably through its base in Tajikistan and through occasional cooperation with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The same applies to other international partners, even the United States and NATO (for example with the short-lived Northern Distribution Network – NDN)¹³. Since the Taliban

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁹ Crucially, Britain, the main power in the region, did not recognize the authority of the Afghan government of Emir Habibullah (1901-1919). London would recognize the Emir in the third Afghan war (1919), itself facilitated by the Bolshevik victory over London on the Russo-Afghan border (Mikhail Volodarsky, *The Soviet Union and its Southern Neighbours: Iran and Afghanistan 1917-1933*, Routledge, 2014, pp. 121-122).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹¹ This is the argument of the author ‘Reframing Russia’s’ *FRRI Central Asian Policy Papers*, 29 July 2021.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ The patchwork of logistics ended in 2015 as part of the US/NATO withdrawal and the post-Crimea fallout in diplomatic relations between Russia and the West (Andrew Kuchins, Thomas Sanderson, “The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan” *A Report of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project and the Russia and Eurasia Program*, January 2010).

takeover, Moscow has only reinforced these defense and diplomacy initiatives, simultaneously deterring the Taliban and engaging the parties to the Afghan conflict¹⁴.

Because of the fundamental nature of these security interests, Russia has no investment in what regime rules Afghanistan as long as it delivers in terms of stability¹⁵. This ideological flexibility has led Moscow to drastically change its perspective on the Taliban in the past few years¹⁶. During the 1990s, Moscow regarded the Taliban as a threat although it included the group into its list of terrorist organizations only in 2003. Due to this threat perception, Russia was a partner to the anti-Taliban resistance from as early as 1995. The sense of threat from Afghanistan diminished as the US-led operation began in that country but remained present as drug trafficking increased. Eventually, Moscow's Afghan diplomacy increased anew in the 2010 decade because of the announced US withdrawal and the rise of the Islamic State Organization (here 'Daesh' for short)¹⁷. Daesh in Central Asia has extensively recruited people from the region, many of which are Russian-speakers. In fact, it was believed that these were the single largest foreign group of IS recruits¹⁸. This factor alone contributed to Russia's perception of the Taliban as a lesser evil, thus shaped the grounds for its engagement with the group. Since about 2015, Russia has reportedly shared intelligence with the Taliban for it to fight Daesh¹⁹ and has sought to have a Taliban representative in the Afghanistan peace negotiations it has been carrying out (Russia's peace initiatives have been primarily conducted through the "Moscow format", active since 2017; it involves representatives from Central Asian states, China, India, Iran and Pakistan, as well as the internationally-recognized Afghan government and the Taliban). Driven by its fear of Daesh, by the summer of 2021, Russia became among the Taliban's largest external supporters according to the group itself²⁰.

Demonstrating its pragmatism, Moscow has also established channels to the official Afghan government, often benefitting from Kabul-Washington tensions. Russia's relationship with the internationally-recognized government oscillated between cooperation and estrangement. During the first decade of ISAF, Russia actively cooperated with the Afghan government on matters of security, reconstruction and provided extensive non-lethal supplies to assist its consolidation against the Taliban²¹. These led to good relations between the Afghan leadership and Russia. For instance, former president Hamid Karzai was among the very few world leaders to openly recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea. This trend

¹⁴ Samuel R. Hurst, "Russia and the Taliban: Prospective Partners?" *RUSI Commentary*, 14 September 2021.

¹⁵ Dmitry Trenin, Oleg Kulakov, Alexey Malashenko, and Petr Koryunov, "A Russian Strategy for Afghanistan After the Coalition Troop Withdrawal" *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 2014.

¹⁶ This is the argument of "The Taliban Has Reached Kabul! Why Is Moscow So Calm?" *Riddle*, 16 August 2021.

¹⁷ "Daesh" is an Arabic shorthand for the group. The Islamic State has its Middle East and Africa "branches" since 2011. The latter is often referred to as Islamic State-Khorasan or IS-K. The most comprehensive account of the group is Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad*, London, Oxford University Press, 2018.

¹⁸ Edward L. Hutchings, "Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia" *Kennan Cable* 38, 2018.

¹⁹ Giustozzi, *op. cit.*, p. 44, p. 140.

²⁰ Antonio Giustozzi, "Alliances Over Key to the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan" *Terrain Analysis*, Newlines Institute, 9 September 2021.

²¹ Dick Kravitz, "Why Russia Is Cooperating With the West in Afghanistan" *Russian Analytical Digest*, vol. 10, n° 80, 2010.

continued under Ashraf Ghani²². Indeed, even after breaking its taboo of engaging the Taliban, Moscow did not abandon its talks with Kabul. For instance, in May 2019, for the 100th anniversary of Russo-Afghan diplomatic relations, Moscow invited Ghani and the Taliban to Moscow for peace negotiations and called for the exit of all foreign forces from Afghanistan²³.

In sum, Russia has consistently subordinated its contacts with the political forces in Afghanistan to its containment policy in that country. Stated otherwise, Moscow will engage and favor the Taliban as long as the group contributes to its policy of containing Afghan instability from going north. This short historical background described how this containment policy came to be and how it echoes long trends in Russo-Afghan relations. However, the August 15th Taliban takeover necessitated a reformulation or recalibration of Moscow's policy to adapt to the new realities on the ground. Much of this recalibration was dependent on the assets Russia had on the ground in Afghanistan at the time as well as on its relations with other third parties to the Afghanistan conflict.

2. Afghanistan, Russia and the broader international context of the Taliban takeover

Russia's Afghanistan policy is not evolving solely in the context of bilateral relations. As the background of Russo-Afghan engagements hints at, Russia has formulated its Afghanistan policy looking at broader trends outside of the two countries. Implicit is a notion that goes against frequent portrayals of Afghanistan as a country at the margins of globalization where great powers may meet. Indeed, Afghanistan constantly finds itself as the focus of attention of international actors, and as the channel for international flows of people and goods, of legal and illegal status²⁴. This is a paradox in Afghanistan's geopolitics. On the one hand, Afghanistan borders China and Iran, and it is close to India and the Eurasian steppe, connecting it with Russia. On the other hand, Afghanistan's mountainous terrain, poor infrastructure and long-term internal conflict has made it difficult for outside states to trade with and across that country. Thus, Afghanistan is one of the areas where the Eurasian space becomes fragmented²⁵.

Mending this fragmentation has become a paramount interest for many external actors in the past twenty years. It is in this international and strategic context that Russia approaches its ongoing political goals in Afghanistan. Therefore, attention needs to be given to the triangular relationship between Russia, Afghanistan and other third states. Selected cases of multilateral organizations, as well as China, Pakistan and Tajikistan, will be covered here. Since August 15th, these three countries have emerged as key players in Russia's Afghanistan policy, either for cooperation and coordination (China, Pakistan) or for conflict management (Tajikistan). Tellingly, none of them closed their Kabul embassies after the Taliban

²² Jokim Bruneau, "Is Russia back in Afghanistan?" *PRIO Policy Brief*, n° 4, 2016.

²³ "Hosting Taliban Delegates, Russia Calls For Withdrawal Of Foreign Forces From Afghanistan" , *RFE/RL*, 28 May 2019.

²⁴ On the importance of international Afghanistan Networks and Connectivity" *Geopolitics*, vol. 4, n° 15, 2010, pp. 726-775.

²⁵ Bruneau, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

takeover²⁶. Also, there is evidence that Russia has been in constant communication with these three states since the Taliban seized Kabul²⁷. In addition, China and Pakistan are part of the multilateral negotiation initiatives that Russia has been a member of since 2019 in the “extended troika” format (the United States being a member too). After August 15th, 2021, Moscow indicated that this format would continue to work and engage the Taliban²⁸. To maintain a focused analysis on Russia, the paper limits its attention to the triangular relationship between each of these states, Afghanistan and Russia²⁹.

Afghanistan’s geographic location is a significant factor that has driven these countries to meet there. Afghanistan’s potential as a transport hub for Eurasia is important as it would facilitate the globalization of the landlocked part of Central Asia³⁰. It would also enable easier access to Afghanistan’s mineral wealth³¹, which some connectivity programs directly address. Every major external actor has, implicitly or explicitly, endorsed or sponsored a connectivity program for Afghanistan. These programs tend to focus on investment in physical infrastructure and other forms of connectivity. They include: the Euro-Asian Transport Links (funded by the EU and the UN)³², China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)³³, the Lapis Lazuli corridor (Asian Development Bank, ADB)³⁴, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC, by the ADB)³⁵, the US International Finance Development Corporation (DFC)³⁶, the connectivity initiatives of the European Union (EU)³⁷ and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)³⁸, among other such programs. The

²⁶ Me k h a l a S o o d, [“Secured or Open: What's the Status of Embassies in Afghanistan?”](#) *The Quint*, 20 August 2021.

²⁷ E d i t h M. L u s e r a e r s, [“Russia says it's in sync with Taliban, Pakistan”](#) AP News, 26 September 2021.

²⁸ “ [Putin told the SCO and the CSTO what to tal rebuild Afghanistan], TASS, 17 September 2021.

²⁹ It should be noted that other countries have proven important for Moscow in dealing with the Afghanistan situation, such as Iran, Turkey and the United States.

³⁰ I v a n S a f r a n k, [“Afghanistan's Political Future”](#) *India Quarterly*, vol. 1, n° 75, 2019, pp. 15-28.

³¹ S c o t t L. M o n a g h a n, [“Afghanistan has vast mineral wealth but faces steep challenges to tap it”](#), *The Conversation*, 31 August 2021.

³² “ E u r o - A s i a n L i n e s ” [http://www.eurasianlinks.org/transport/euro-asian-links](#).

³³ There is a vast literature on the BRI. An article to Belt & Road initiative: motivations *China Economic Review*, n° 40a, 2016, assess pp. 314-321.

³⁴ While the United States is not a participant, it has been argued that Washington wins from this initiative as an alternative [“The Geopolitics of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor”](#) *The Diplomat*, 22 December 2017).

³⁵ This program finances the development of several transport corridors across Central Asia. Among them, there are three major east-west corridors, one of which (the central one) goes across Afghanistan. CAREC groups together several countries, namely Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Mongolia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey [http://www.carecprogram.org](#).

³⁶ Created in 2019, this organization is under the US State Department and was consciously designed to operate as an alternative and competitor to China’s BRI. Afghanistan as one of the countries eligible to apply [http://www.dfc.gov](#).

³⁷ There is no comprehensive EU program for Afghan infrastructure, but the EU has kept connectivity as one of its main fields [“EU funded bridge between Afghanistan and Tajikistan a symbol of hope in times of challenges”](#) Delegation of the European Union to Afghanistan, 2 May 2021).

³⁸ “Afghanistan Formally Joins SAARC” *India Review*, vol. 3, n° 5, 2007, pp. 1-6.

Central Asian states have their own initiatives, such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline³⁹, and Uzbekistan's north-south corridor⁴⁰. For Russia, economic relations with Afghanistan are not large, therefore not a driver of its policy towards that country. In 2019, Russia imported a mere five million USD worth of goods from Afghanistan and exported there a hundred million USD⁴¹. Investment has grown consistently since the middle of the 2010s, with highlights in Russia's restoration of the Soviet house of culture in Kabul, now the Russian Cultural Centre⁴². The Taliban takeover has paused these programs and thrown many of them into question, yet the investment potential is still there.

Parallel to these connectivity initiatives, Afghanistan participates in some of the multilateral organizations that cover Eurasia. Before the Taliban takeover, these were part of Afghanistan's growing connections to the world after the isolation of the Taliban regime in the 1990s. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which includes 57 Muslim-majority states, welcomed Afghanistan as a full member in 1969, and Russia as an observer state in 2005⁴³. Since the inclusion of Afghanistan, the OIC has closely followed developments in that country, providing assistance to refugees and reconstruction financing at various points in history. By the summer of 2021, the OIC called the war in Afghanistan a "*genocide of Muslims*"⁴⁴, and in early August it called for an inclusive ceasefire among the fighting parties⁴⁵. Afghanistan has also been an observer member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and a focus of attention of that organization from early on. In 2005, the SCO created a contact group with Afghanistan in order to cooperate against terrorism and drug trafficking⁴⁶. Then, in 2012, Afghanistan became an observer of the organization. By the summer of 2021, Kabul was pursuing full member status in the SCO⁴⁷. The Taliban takeover put all official Afghan participation abroad under question.

In spite of the uncertainty produced by the August 2021 events, there have been numerous contacts between Taliban-controlled Kabul and foreign parties. Indeed, the *de facto* minister of foreign affairs commented that the Taliban intends to establish relations with the entire world⁴⁸. Just the first half of October 2021 proved to be a very intensive time for Taliban

³⁹ This highly dubious project has been in the making for decades, with no certain completion (Luca Anceschi, "Turkmenistan and the virtuous circle of the TAPI pipeline: a project of Central Asian Survey, vol. 4, n° 36, 2017, pp. 409-429).

⁴⁰ Samuel Doveri, "Connectivity at the core of a 'more stable Afghanistan'" *Euractiv*, 27 July 2021.

⁴¹ "Russia and Afghanistan Trade", Observatory of Economic Complexity [2021].

⁴² Frud Berman, "Restoring Its Legacy, Moscow Invests In Future In Afghanistan" *RFE/RL*, 31 March 2014.

⁴³ About 7 percent of Russia's population is Muslim. Omer Bartov, "Russia and the Middle East: A New Paradigm?" *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 64, n° 3, 2012, pp. 543-560.

⁴⁴ Shadi Khamsi, "Group dubs raging war in Afghanistan as genocide" *Andaluz Agency*, 10 June 2021.

⁴⁵ "L'OIC appelle à la cessation de la violence en Afghanistan", OIC, 4 August 2021.

⁴⁶ These joint efforts have had a limited impact, due, among others, to the small budget assigned to this group for most of the years following its creation (The Afghan Problem from a Russian Perspective" *Russian Analytical Digest*, vol. 10, n° 80, 2010, p. 4).

⁴⁷ Ahmad Bilal Khalid, "Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization" *The Diplomat*, 14 July 2021.

⁴⁸ Vladimir Kulagin, "Afghanistan: 'To promise does not mean to marry': f-why the ghan authorities]", *gazeta.ru*, 11 October 2021.

diplomacy, featuring discussions with the United Kingdom⁴⁹, the United States⁵⁰, Turkey⁵¹ and Russia⁵². Similarly, after hesitancy at the start, international humanitarian aid has also begun to be pledged and to arrive. On August 22nd, the OIC called for aid for Afghanistan and for an inclusive solution to the conflict⁵³. On October 12th, the EU promised a billion euros in aid, conditional on Taliban respect for human rights⁵⁴. Thus, at the time of writing, the overarching trend has been of active though cautious international engagement with the Taliban, a trend in which, as described below, Russia takes part.

China

As two regional powers, Russia and China have found ways to cohabit in Central Asia⁵⁵, and now they are coordinating a way to do the same in Afghanistan. China has had a generally conciliatory attitude to the Taliban since 1999. On July 27th, as the group was capturing Afghan territory rapidly, the Chinese minister of foreign affairs hosted a Taliban delegation to discuss security matters and receive guarantees from the Taliban about transnational terrorism⁵⁶. Since then, the tempo of contacts has increased. During a telephone meeting on September 2nd, Chinese and Taliban officials agreed on the need for Afghanistan to receive Chinese reconstruction funds⁵⁷. Yet, in spite of these moves, China has reservations about recognizing the Taliban government. The key reason is that, like Russia, China hopes that the Taliban will move effectively against transnational terrorism and will become a trustworthy partner in investment. On the latter, the Taliban has sent strong signals of their disposition to work with China. On September 7th, the Taliban announced their intention of integrating Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, an investment and infrastructure program⁵⁸. Later on, the Taliban began to move against the groups seen by China as threatening. On October 5th, RFE/RL reported that the Taliban “removed” Uyghur militants from the northeast region of the country, a move seen by analysts as in line with its China agreements on transnational terrorism⁵⁹.

China’s leverage with the Taliban is large, which has consequences for Russia’s own Taliban policy. By September 2nd, the relative character of Russia’s importance was affirmed as the Taliban named China its “most important partner”, most of all thanks to its aid and financial

⁴⁹ “L’envoyé britannique pour l’Afghanistan a rencontré des dirigeants talibans à Kaboul” *Le Figaro*, 5 October 2021.

⁵⁰ “Afghanistan : discussions ‘franches’ Taliban à Doha” *Le Monde*, 11 October 2021.

⁵¹ Suzan Fraser, “Khan Taliban Delegation in Turkey for High-level Talks”, *The Diplomat*, 15 October 2021.

⁵² “Russia invites Taliban to Afghanistan conference in Moscow” *Al Jazeera*, 7 October 2021.

⁵³ “Communiqué final de la réunion extraordinaire à composition non limitée du Comité exécutif de l’OCI au niveau des représentants permanents” *OCIS*, 22 August 2021.

⁵⁴ “Afghanistan : l’aide promise par l’UE s’élève à un milliard d’euros” *France 24*, 12 October 2021.

⁵⁵ Bradley Jardine, “In East Asia, Russia and China are Tightening Their Grip” *War on the Rocks*, 7 October 2021.

⁵⁶ Bruno Philip, “La Chine affirme que les talibans sont ‘une force puissante et cruciale en’” *Le Monde*, 30 July 2021.

⁵⁷ “La Chine ‘premier partenaire’ de la reconstruction de l’Afghanistan” *RFI*, 3 September 2021.

⁵⁸ “Taliban say they ‘Pakistan Economic Corridor projects’” *Hindustan Times*, 7 September 2021.

⁵⁹ Reid Stauber, “Taliban ‘Removing’ Uyghur Militants From Afghanistan’s Border With China” , *RFE/RL*, 5 October 2021.

assistance⁶⁰. This reflects the broader pattern of China-Russia cohabitation in Central Asia⁶¹. Whilst Russia is the foremost security provider to the Central Asian region, China is the region's main economic partner⁶². Afghanistan has proven a more complex case as China has deployed its security edge in ways it has not done in the past, including a military installation in Tajikistan and its first international training mission there too⁶³. But this growing security presence only overlaps with Russia's to an extent. Notably, China's security cooperation with the Central Asian states focuses more on security services and police work than on the military sphere⁶⁴. There is no evidence as of writing that China is moving security assets to Afghanistan itself. In this sense, there is no conflictive overlap or competition between Moscow and Beijing in security matters in Afghanistan. Similarly, there is no overlap in finance; China has the resources to fund at least part of Afghanistan's reconstruction whilst Russia has been more cautious on that score⁶⁵. Russia's relative advantages in engaging foreign partners, namely security and defense capabilities and nuclear power⁶⁶, are not needed by the Taliban in the short term. Yet, Beijing would like additional input from its partners on Afghan matters. On September 17th, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping called for the SCO member states to assist the transition of power in Afghanistan⁶⁷. In addition, there has been speculation that Beijing might want to rekindle the SCO accession process for Afghanistan⁶⁸. In sum, the overall picture of the Russia-China-Afghanistan triangle does not point to either competition or fully articulated cooperation, but as long as Beijing and Moscow maintain good relations, they are disposed to find ways to avoid conflictive overlaps in Afghanistan.

Pakistan

The Pakistan-Afghanistan-Russia triangle has been of paramount importance for Moscow since the creation of Pakistan. Pakistan has a long and deep connection to Afghanistan in part because of "strategic depth", the concept that has guided Islamabad's interactions with that country. This notion captures Islamabad's policy of active involvement in Afghanistan to prevent threats coming from the north⁶⁹, either from Indian influence or from Afghanistan's rejection of the Durand Line⁷⁰. In the 1990s, Islamabad sought to patronize the Taliban to

⁶⁰ "Afghanistan: Taliban to rely on Chinese funds, spokesperson says" *Al Jazeera*, 2 September 2021.

⁶¹ This is the argument "What are China and Russia up to in Afghanistan?", *Nikkei*, 23 October 2021.

⁶² This has been the trend so far. Yet, there are already indications that this may increase (see Andrei Kazantsev *et al.*, "Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 12, n° 1, 2021, pp. 57-71).

⁶³ The Chinese government has "For A Secret Base in Tajikistan, Be China's War On Terror Adjusts To A New Reality" *Gandhara*, 14 October 2021).

⁶⁴ Jardine and Lemon, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ Russia did announce at the end of August that it would participate in the reconstruction of Afghanistan but no specifics have been announced since then ("Russia will participate in reconstruction of Afghanistan", *Lenta.ru*, 30 August 2021).

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Frederic Wehrer, "Assessing Russian Capabilities in the Levant and North Africa" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 August 2021.

⁶⁷ "China's Xi says SCO states should help drive smooth Afghan transition" Reuters, 17 September 2021.

⁶⁸ "The Taliban Takeover and Central Asian Security: What Will Russia and China Do?" , panel discussion hosted by the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, 30 September 2021.

⁶⁹ Alexander Pakiz, "Pakistan and the Shadow of 9/11" *RUSI Journal*, vol. 4, n° 156, 2011, pp. 64-70.

⁷⁰ Kabul has not recognized the Durand Line as the legitimate border with Pakistan. This issue has occasionally surfaced in and soured Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, most recently in 2017 (Vinay

operationalize this policy. In recent years however, ties between Pakistan and the Taliban have frayed, notably over the Taliban's Pashtun nationalism, its support for the Pakistani Taliban "branch"⁷¹, and its potential irredentist claims⁷². By the summer of 2021, Pakistan was well positioned to engage the Taliban again but with these caveats present. On September 5th, the head of Pakistan's intelligence services met the Taliban leadership in Kabul⁷³. Encounters like these have not assuaged Islamabad about the situation north of its borders. On September 22nd, Pakistani Prime Minister I. Khan commented that a civil war in Afghanistan would be highly detrimental to Pakistan⁷⁴. Stability in Afghanistan is thus an essential goal for Islamabad. Pakistan's position has not gained a regional edge, as the SAARC has not responded to the Taliban takeover due to dissent to Islamabad's proposal for the Taliban to represent Afghanistan in that organization⁷⁵.

As of writing, there is an overlap between Moscow and Islamabad in their views of the Taliban. Namely, both of them see the group as a viable path for stability in Afghanistan. In this sense, for Russia, Pakistan is an essential partner in Afghan affairs. This has been rendered visible in the post-takeover contacts between the two countries. Moscow commented in late September 2021 that it was in "constant communication" with China and Pakistan on Afghan matters⁷⁶, and on October 19th hosted a meeting on Afghanistan with Chinese and Pakistani officials⁷⁷. Moscow and Islamabad also converged on the topic of Tajikistan's opposition to the Taliban, namely, they have called for Dushanbe to dialogue with the group⁷⁸. At the same time, history between Pakistan and Moscow does not offer clear paths for cooperation. There has been rivalry between the two in Afghanistan inasmuch Pakistan inherited this rivalry with Russia from the British Empire⁷⁹. Afghanistan's Cold War era support for Pashtun guerrillas in Pakistan was itself supported by the USSR⁸⁰. Then, Pakistan's support for the Afghan anti-Socialist *mujahideen* in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 1990s kept Moscow and Islamabad at opposite ends. By the middle of the 2010s, Pakistan still loomed large in Moscow as a source of threat to Russia through Afghanistan. Cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad in Afghanistan has some grounds thanks to junctural convergence in their interest in a stable Afghanistan, but their perspectives on the matter are ultimately different.

Kaura, "The Dufand Line: A British Legacy Plaguing Afghan-Pakistani Relations", *Middle East Institute*, 27 June 2017).

⁷¹ The activities of the Pakistan branch of the Taliban did increase after August 15th (Tobias Matern, Arne Pelt, "Mit Boasen auf dem Weg zum Scharia-Staat?" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2 October 2021).

⁷² There has been discussion about the extent to which the Taliban has grounded itself on Pashtun nationalism, with those that advocate a perspective that identifies the Taliban as a Pashtun organization and those that stress Islamic identity as the Taliban's foremost identification between Pakistan and the Taliban, see Kaura, *op. cit.*.

⁷³ "Afghanistan: le chef du renseignement militaire pakistanais à Kaboul" *RFI*, 5 September 2021.

⁷⁴ "Pakistan's Imran Khan warns 'not to let Afghanistan become a Scharia state'" *Al Jazeera*, 22 September 2021.

⁷⁵ Prabhush Saper, "Diagnosing Afghanistan from SAARC and international law", *Observer Research Fund*, 26 September 2021.

⁷⁶ Edith M. Lusé, "Russia says it's in sync with Afghanistan", *AP News*, 26 September 2021.

⁷⁷ "Poutine inquiet de l'essor d'une 'amiq'ue en Afghanistan" *La Presse*, 15 October 2021.

⁷⁸ Catherine Tension, "On Rise Between Tajikistan and the Taliban" *The Diplomat*, 5 October 2021.

⁷⁹ As discussed above, this needs to be taken with caution but not dismissed either (Mark N. Katz, "Putin's Predicament: Russia's Asia Policy", *Asia Policy*, n°14, 2014, p. 16).

⁸⁰ Selig Harrison, "Global terrorism: US policy after 9/11 relations in Rajiv Prakash Jetti (ed.), *Pakistan in Regional and Global Politics*, New Delhi and Milton Park, Routledge, 2009, p. 26.

Tajikistan

The Russia-Tajikistan-Afghanistan triangle has emerged as a key point in the international relations of post-takeover Afghanistan. One could be too quick to dismiss Tajikistan in the Afghanistan crisis. Indeed, Tajikistan exemplifies the Central Asian “paradox of power”, where weak states are governed by strong regimes⁸¹. Emomali Rahmon, Tajikistan’s decades-long ruler, has managed to effectively monopolize power under his authority. Tajikistan does not have the resources or influence to shape events in Afghanistan according to its preferences, but it does have leverage in the current juncture. In fact, due to its long border with Afghanistan and Afghanistan’s extensive ethnic Tajik population, Tajikistan has had a crucial role in the post-1991 events in Afghanistan⁸². During the 1990s, Tajikistan’s territory served as the lifeline for the anti-Taliban Northern coalition, and for all foreign parties involved against the Taliban. In the two decades that followed, Tajikistan remained important in Afghan affairs, for example by participating in the NDN. The Taliban takeover disturbed Tajikistan. In early July, Dushanbe called for CSTO allies to help them because of the situation in Afghanistan⁸³. Since then, Dushanbe has articulated a consistent anti-Taliban position, demanding that the group create a government that is inclusive of the Tajik and other minorities in that country. In this sense, the announcement of the September 7th transitional government did nothing to assuage Dushanbe, which continues to engage third parties, such as France, in opposing the Taliban⁸⁴.

For Russia, Tajikistan is a critical ally in Afghanistan. It is Moscow’s sole treaty ally bordering that country as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have traced their own trajectories in defense matters⁸⁵. Yet, Tajikistan’s small size and high dependence on Russia have not translated into that country being just Russia’s launching pad. Tajikistan is the only Central Asian state that has not opted for a policy of engagement with the Taliban while Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan⁸⁶, Turkmenistan⁸⁷ and Uzbekistan⁸⁸ have all opted for a conciliatory stance towards the group. Russia has not dissuaded Dushanbe from engaging in its anti-Taliban diplomacy, at least openly, but it has called for dialogue between them and the Taliban⁸⁹. Whilst Russia consistently denied intentions to send troops to Afghanistan, increasing its military presence

⁸¹ Filippo Costa Burana [The Pervasive Nature of Power in Central Asia](#) , *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 2, n° 68, 2021, pp. 92-103.

⁸² This is the argument [Dorff’ t t h U n d a e r t e h s o t r i ’ n s a t a e r t i a q D r e k i “ s t a n i s i s ”](#) *The Diplomat*, 2 September 2021.

⁸³ [“Tajikistan Reportedly Calls On Allies For Help With Security Challenges From Afghanistan”](#) , *RFE/RL*, 7 July 2021.

⁸⁴ [“Déclaration conjointe du Président Emmanuel Macron et du Président de la République du Tadjikistan Emomali Rahmon”](#) Elysée, 13 October 2021.

⁸⁵ Turkmenistan is one of the few countries in the world with a UN-recognized “neutral” [f o c](#) while Uzbekistan has sought to be self-reliant in security matters (on Turkmenistan, see Luca Anceschi, *Turkmenistan's foreign policy: Positive neutrality and the consolidation of the Turkmen regime*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2008).

⁸⁶ Bruce P [Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan Open Channels With The Taliban](#) *Gandhara*, 1 October 2021.

⁸⁷ [“Turkmenistan: Taliban of brothers”](#) *Eurasianet*, 24 August 2021.

⁸⁸ Bruce P [Uzbekistan Has Good Reasons To Be On Good Terms With The Taliban](#) *RFE/RL*, 23 September 2021.

⁸⁹ Abdullah [Russia Calls for Dialogue Between Afghanistan, Tajikistan](#) *ToloNews*, 1 October 2021.

in Tajikistan was contemplated from the very start of the Taliban advance⁹⁰. Tajikistan, in spite of its limited resources and leverage, has the potential to become a pivotal third party to the Afghan conflict in its current stage. For Russia, keeping Dushanbe on its side is thus essential.

3. Russia and the takeover, May-October 2021

In the spring of 2021, the Taliban began making significant gains throughout Afghanistan, eventually taking power on August 15th. As of writing in November, the Taliban could claim control over the entire territory of Afghanistan except for pockets of resistance, like the Panjshir valley⁹¹. Whether Russian intelligence was able to determine the likelihood of the takeover ahead of time is unknown⁹². In any case, the fall of Kabul brought an unknown situation for Moscow that was met by deploying the already existing features of Russia's Afghanistan policy: border protection, talks with the fighting parties and with other third parties to the conflict. As was previously pointed out, the central issue of Russia-Taliban relations before and after August 15th has been the credibility of Taliban security assurances, specifically their ability to consolidate power and fight Daesh.

By early summer 2021, the broad features of Moscow's response to the Taliban taking power emerged. Early on, Russia mobilized its CSTO allies and military assets in Tajikistan. On July 7th, Lavrov commented that Russia was ready to activate its military base in Tajikistan to respond to any threat to that country that may arise from Afghanistan⁹³. August, September and October saw Russia carry out military exercises with its treaty allies and Uzbekistan (a country with which it has no mutual defense assurances)⁹⁴. A strong signal was thus sent: Russia may not intervene in Afghanistan, but it will not neglect Central Asian security either. Indeed, whilst Moscow's reaction to the Taliban's victory was measured, its opinion was that the collapse of the internationally-recognized government was fraught with many risks. Reflecting the degree of uncertainty of the time, Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev commented on June 24th that the Taliban takeover threatened a new civil war in Afghanistan with clear risks for Russia⁹⁵. The presence of Daesh in Afghanistan was also noted by Russian officials as an enduring challenge before the Taliban captured Kabul⁹⁶.

⁹⁰ “ ‘...’ The possibility of is not dismissed, but ...’ Experts comment about the ‘deployment’ of *Radio Sputnik*, 8 July 2021.

⁹¹ Heike Schaffner, “Afghanistan: dans la vallée du Panshir, la résistance persiste” RFI, 10 October 2021.

⁹² It was reported on October 13th that the Russian intelligence “predicted” [Russia predicted early how the situation in Afghanistan would evolve], *Izvestiya*, 13 October 2021).

⁹³ “ [Lavrov allows the use of the Russian base because of the situation in Afghanistan], *Radio Sputnik*, 7 July 2021.

⁹⁴ “Russia-led bloc holds large-scale drills near Tajik-Afghan border” Reuters, 18 October 2021.

⁹⁵ “ [Patrushev's predictions and NATO troops withdrawal from Afghanistan], *Izvestiya*, 24 June 2021.

⁹⁶ “ [Lavrov: Daesh is actively engaging in Afghanistan's territories in the context of NATO troops], TASS, 2 July 2021.

Security assurances were the main concern discussed during a July 8th meeting between Russian and Taliban officials in Moscow, where the group promised to fight Daesh and not to threaten the Central Asian states⁹⁷. This issue would continue to dominate Russia's Taliban policy as of November 2021.

Perhaps proceeding from these assurances, and unlike in the 1990s, Russia did not attempt to stop the Taliban from consolidating power. In fact, its actions have been measured before and after August 15th, neither overtly opposing or supporting the group. Russia chose not to follow the majority of countries present in Afghanistan and kept its embassy open after the takeover⁹⁸. This was a conspicuous move, which was followed by many public declarations by Russian officials on the ground about how safe Kabul was after August 15th, 2021⁹⁹. This can be seen as a gesture of good will towards the Taliban, at a sensitive moment when Moscow sought to build rapport with the new *de facto* authorities of the country. The goodwill paid off in the form of early access to Taliban officials. Indeed, on August 17th, Russian ambassador Dmitry Zhirnov met with the Taliban in Kabul. In comparison, the first encounter between UK officials and the Taliban post-takeover took place only in October¹⁰⁰.

These early overtures have not produced major breakthroughs though. The dubious credibility of Taliban security assurances has reinforced Russia's pragmatism towards the group. Namely, there would be engagement without commitment or formal recognition. President Putin spoke about Afghanistan for the first time since the takeover on August 20th, setting the political line that Russia would take on the Taliban, namely, that the world needs to engage the Taliban on Afghan matters regardless of status¹⁰¹. Implicit was the message that no formal recognition was on the table albeit *de facto* recognition is granted. Engagement has proceeded from this basis ever since. The establishment of the "interim" Taliban government on September 7th dismayed the world by its overt lack of inclusion of women and national minorities¹⁰². Putin commented that the new government is indeed not inclusive, but is still the partner that the world needs to approach on Afghan matters¹⁰³. On September 17th, the Russian president commented that the international community must "stimulate" the Taliban towards fulfilling its international commitments¹⁰⁴. On September 20th, the Russian foreign ministry expressed a similar view, putting additional emphasis on

⁹⁷ " [The Taliban promise Moscow they will not violate the borders of the Central Asian states], Interfax, 8 July 2021.

⁹⁸ Pierre Rissais: ["Bon baisers de Kaboul!"](#) *France Inter*, 17 August 2021.

⁹⁹ " [Russian Ambassador : " Kabul is better under the Taliban than under President Ghani], *Kommersant*, 16 August 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Patricia UK: ["Officials return to Afghanistan to meet Taliban for first time since takeover"](#) , *The Guardian*, 5 October 2021.

¹⁰¹ "Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und Präsident Putin anlässlich des Besuchs der Bundeskanzlerin in der Russischen Föderation am 20. August 2021" [Press conference of Merkel and President Putin on the Russian Federation on 20 the Ch August 2021], *Die Bundesregierung*, 20 August 2021.

¹⁰² The Taliban also abolished ["En Afghanistan, Mohammad Hassan Akhund va prendre la tête du nouveau gouvernement taliban"](#) *France 24*, 7 September 2021).

¹⁰³ " [Putin: The Taliban government cannot be called representative, but it is necessary to work with the TASS, 17 September 2021.

¹⁰⁴ " [Putin compared the hasty withdrawal of US troops a TASS, 17 September 2021.

promises concerning Central Asian and Russian security¹⁰⁵. Finally, the October 20th Moscow meeting between the Taliban, Russia, China and Pakistan resulted in promises of aid and renewed Taliban security assurances¹⁰⁶. In sum, in spite of initial mutual goodwill and frequent contacts, Moscow is yet to become fully convinced about the Taliban's promises.

The lack of breakthroughs regarding the Taliban's declarations about Daesh has not left Moscow a passive observer of the Afghan juncture. Russia's moves in the diplomatic sphere have been plentiful as it has activated its diplomatic networks to consult and coordinate a response to Afghan matters. Meetings have been held with Moscow's BRICS partners¹⁰⁷, the CSTO, the SCO, among other organizations, and in bilateral formats, with countries such as the United States, Turkey and Iran. The common feature of these encounters are Moscow's attempts to find partners with whom to coordinate an Afghanistan policy. The results of these efforts have been mixed. On the one hand, Moscow has established consistent contacts with all major third parties to the Afghan conflict, namely China, Pakistan and the United States, with India, Iran and Turkey also close by. Then, Russia has found that the views of its Central Asian partners are similar to its own (with the important exception of Tajikistan), with each of them reaffirming their commitment to common security and engagement with the Taliban. Finally, as mentioned above, many countries have converged with Moscow's perspective on engaging the Taliban and sending aid to Afghanistan regardless of the regime in that country. On the other hand, Russia's normative claims on Western culpability for the takeover (see below) are not reflected in the Taliban engagement of other countries. For instance, the G20 special summit on Afghanistan did not produce diplomatic breakthroughs along Moscow's narrow objectives, even though it did result in aid being promised¹⁰⁸.

These diplomatic initiatives, together with Moscow's broader Afghan diplomacy, have proceeded on a clear strategic narrative. Namely, Russia blames the United States and NATO for the collapse of the Afghan government. This line of criticism was slowly becoming evident well before the takeover. For instance, on July 28th, defense minister Sergey Shoigu commented that the NATO mission "lost comprehensiveness in Afghanistan"¹⁰⁹. Putin repeated this argument numerous times since August 15th, stressing that the West is responsible for a catastrophe that is relevant to "the entire world"¹¹⁰. The narrative of the US and NATO failure in Afghanistan has been then used to justify some normative claims that Russia has advocated on Afghanistan, of which two points stand out.

First, there is the issue of Afghanistan's sovereign wealth. State financing and debt would quickly emerge as crucial issues for Taliban-run Afghanistan. Critically, on August 15th, the US

¹⁰⁵ “

” [Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs comment on its promises], TASS, 20 September 2021.

¹⁰⁶ “

” [The Taliban met with the special envoys of Afghanistan to discuss Afghanistan], TASS, 20 October 2021,

¹⁰⁷ “

” [The BRICS countries may meet on Afghanistan soon], TASS, 17 September 2021.

¹⁰⁸ “G20 pledges help for Afghan humanitarian crisis at special summit” Reuters, 13 October 2021.

¹⁰⁹ “

hensiveness’: Shoigu about the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan” [‘They lost comprehensively’ : Shoigu about the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan], Sputnik Radio, 28 July 2021.

¹¹⁰ “

” Izvestiya, 9 September 2021.

froze Afghanistan's Central Bank reserves for them to be out of reach for the Taliban. Similarly, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank blocked Taliban access to emergency funding days before the takeover was complete¹¹¹. The *de facto* authorities in Kabul have found themselves insolvent and in debt. Indeed, the country imports most of its electricity¹¹² and depends overwhelmingly on foreign donors to fund its budget. On August 30th, Russia called the international community to unfreeze Afghanistan's funds for the Taliban to access and use for reconstruction. According to Russia, the West had a moral responsibility to do this because of ISAF's failures, and because the Taliban might turn to drug trafficking for revenue¹¹³. As the topic remains relevant, Moscow has continued to speak about it. By early October, the Taliban asked help to manage the debts of Afghanistan, especially concerning energy. They even turned to the UN for help¹¹⁴.

The second point is Russia's stance against so-called liberal military interventionism, a long-standing point of contention between Moscow and the West beginning from the NATO 1999 Kosovo operation. Russia has advanced a normative view against interventionism and for the primacy of the sovereign right of states¹¹⁵. In his August 20th speech, Putin labelled the international operation in Afghanistan an "experiment" and commented on the ineffectiveness of trying to impose values on foreign societies¹¹⁶. In other words, the failure of NATO in Afghanistan is evidence that the international system should not admit states attempting to change the cultures of other countries. This essentialist and conservative perspective has been a key feature of Russia's foreign policy strategic narratives, one that is found also in Moscow's views on Libya, Syria and Ukraine¹¹⁷.

Finally, Moscow has other instruments in hand for carrying out its international relations. As Moscow struggles to gain credible assurances from the Taliban or to concert a collective response to the Taliban takeover, it may rely more on its "gray zone" resources¹¹⁸. Because of the opaque nature of these, it is not possible to map reliably to what extent Moscow has deployed these assets to Afghanistan so far. Yet, some key actors in these networks have made moves there that hint at what may come. A key operator of Russia's "grey zone", Yevgeny Prigozhin¹¹⁹, has himself commented on the US withdrawal in August, briefly, saying that the United States left "at the first sight of danger"¹²⁰ was reported that a close associate of Prigozhin was present in Afghanistan already twice since August 15th. Maxim

¹¹¹ "Afghanistan: World Bank halts aid after Taliban takeover" BBC, 25 August 2021.

¹¹² Catherine Afshar, "Afghanistan Can't Bill" *The Diplomat*, 7 October 2021. <https://www.diplomat.com/2021/10/07/afghanistan-cant-bill/>

¹¹³ Robyn Dixon, "The world should unfreeze Afghanistan's reserves, Russia says" *Washington Post*, 30 August 2021.

¹¹⁴ Eltaf Naji, "Afghanistan Asks UN to Pay Power Bills Before Country Goes Dark" *Bloomberg*, 6 October 2021.

¹¹⁵ On Russia's normative claims and *Russia, the West, and Interventionist Military Intervention*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹¹⁶ "Putin Takes Shot at West, but Says" *The New York Times*, link to 'M', 20 August 2021.

¹¹⁷ Dogachan Dagi, "The Russian Stand on the Responsibility of the State" *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, vol. 7, n° 3, 2020, pp. 370–386. For further discussion, see Allison, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁸ Kathleen Ryan, "Russia in the Gray Zone" CSIS, 25 July 2019.

¹¹⁹ Known as "Putin's Chef", Prigozhin has numerous business deals" BBC, 4 November 2019).

¹²⁰ "at the first sight of danger": Prigozhin *PolitRussia*, 15 August 2021. actions

Shugaley, a sociologist, was reportedly granted a permit to stay in Afghanistan by Taliban authorities in late August. According to Prigozhin, Shugaley’s visit was meant to carry out “sociological research and have meetings with people on the ground”¹²¹. It has been reported since that these meetings included one with a Taliban spokesman¹²². Part of Shugaley’s reported mission was to assess the opening of a local branch of Shugaley’s and Prigozhin’s organization, the Fund for the Protection of National Values, a think tank under US sanctions¹²³. For that purpose, Shugaley visited Afghanistan again in early October, and on October 7th, it was announced that the Fund will indeed open a new office in Kabul¹²⁴, in order “to help the Afghan people”¹²⁵. A few days later, Shugaley insisted on the good disposition of the Taliban to cooperate with Russia and the business opportunities that Russian companies will find in Afghanistan¹²⁶. As of writing, no additional information has surfaced about Prigozhin’s role in Afghanistan, but these moves hint that Russia’s “grey zone” activities may grow in scope as efforts with the Taliban and third-party engagement stagnate.

4. What is next?

Russia’s post-takeover policy features engagement and deterrence¹²⁷ in what can be called “pragmatic facilitation” of the Taliban¹²⁸. In spite of Russia’s overtures, China emerged as the Taliban’s main foreign partner at this stage. The reason is straightforward: Russia leans towards facilitating the Taliban’s consolidation but it has yet to abandon all caveats it has towards the group. Crucially, Russia’s support for the group is conditional on the Taliban’s fight against Daesh and its security assurances for Central Asia. Dushanbe’s resistance to accommodating the Taliban and the Taliban’s lack of success against Daesh could tilt Moscow to a more neutral position towards the group. As of writing, Russia seems to lean towards recognition but no conditions or timeline have been offered¹²⁹. Regardless of such shifts, in reacting to the Taliban takeover, Russia has demonstrated that its Afghanistan policy is based on long-standing security concerns, an international understanding of the

¹²¹ Veronika Smirnova, “Russia’s New Strategy in Afghanistan” [The WSJ paid attention to Shugaley’s visit to Afghanistan], *Polit Expert*, 5 October 2021.

¹²² Andrei Veselov, “Russia’s New Strategy in Afghanistan” [The ‘Taliban’ are friendly to foreigners], *gazeta.ru*, 27 August 2021.

¹²³ Jared Malsin, “Researcher Say: Maxim Shugaley Saga Points to How Russia Now Builds Influence Abroad” *WSJ*, 5 October 2021.

¹²⁴ “Russia’s New Strategy in Afghanistan” [Maxim Shugaley opened an office of the Fund for the Protection of National Values in Kabul], *New Inform*, 7 October 2021.

¹²⁵ Alexei Solovyov, “Russia’s New Strategy in Afghanistan” [An office of the Fund for the Defense of National Values has opened in Kabul], *Polit Expert*, 7 October 2021.

¹²⁶ Veronika Smirnova, “Russia’s New Strategy in Afghanistan” [‘Alle concerns’: Shugaley assesses the prospects for cooperation between Kabul and Moscow], *Polit Expert*, 11 October 2021.

¹²⁷ Ramani, *op. cit.*

¹²⁸ Ivan U. Kussa, “Russia Defines Its Post-Takeover Role in the Afghan Conflict” *RUSI Commentary*, 2 September 2021.

¹²⁹ UN recognition is sometimes presented as the first step for Russia to recognize the Taliban (“Russia’s New Strategy in Afghanistan” [Putin: ‘we are moving towards recognizing the Taliban’], *Fontanka*, 21 October 2021),

Afghan conflict, and a pragmatic attitude towards the players on the ground. Ultimately, it makes no difference to Moscow who is in power in Kabul, as long as they bring stability to the country.

In the short term, Russia will continue to subordinate its Taliban policy to its Afghanistan policy: Taliban engagement is but the means to the end of a stable Afghanistan. On the diplomatic front, Russia's slow progress in finding external partners with whom to establish impactful cooperation in Afghanistan is unlikely to produce major strategic or diplomatic breakthroughs. The third parties analyzed above have divergent views from Russia's, and there are few areas where capabilities and goals converge neatly. China and Pakistan are the closest to full cooperation with Moscow, but there is little evidence that comprehensive, joint initiatives are afoot. Regarding China, this report argued that there are few grounds for Beijing and Moscow to collide over Afghanistan, for the fact that their presence in the country is limited and managed closely by the Taliban. The common understanding that both countries have developed about Central Asia may expand to Afghanistan, too. As for Pakistan, Moscow may gradually converge with Islamabad's preference for the Taliban, albeit several barriers to full cooperation with Islamabad remain. Other major actors, such as Turkey and the United States, have also proven open to dialogue with Moscow on Afghan matters, but coordination has been sparse. *En revanche*, there is a possibility that the world will converge with Moscow's pragmatic attitude toward the Taliban. A strong indication of that is that the EU plans to reopen its Kabul diplomatic mission before the end of 2021¹³⁰. In addition, recognition does not mean lack of interaction. Moscow will likely lean more on its grey zone assets to consolidate a presence in Afghanistan in ways that were not possible prior to the US withdrawal. However, until more information surfaces about these activities, it is impossible to assert whether these will effectively expand the scope of action for Russia on the ground. In sum, Russia will continue to see the Taliban as the best path for stabilization in Afghanistan, but this is a position it does not hold uncritically.

¹³⁰ The move was framed as a direct response to the continued operations of China and Russia in the country (EU plans to reopen Afghanistan diplomatic mission within a month" *Financial Times*, 24 October 2021).