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SWP Comment

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Afghanistan: The West Fails – a Win for China and Russia?

The Views from Beijing and Moscow

Sabine Fischer and Angela Stanzel

Russia and China are seen as the main beneficiaries of the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan regarding their political influence and potential exertion of power. In both the Chinese and Russian debate, however, alongside triumphant comments about Western failure, serious concerns about the regional security situation are being voiced. Western actors should seek a more nuanced understanding of Beijing's and Moscow's perspectives. This could also lead to opportunities for cooperation that would serve to stabilise Central Asia and Afghanistan. In view of the intensifying global systemic rivalry, however, the scope for cooperation will remain limited.

In the Western debate, the prevailing belief is that Moscow and Beijing are now using the power vacuum left by the United States (US) and its allies in Afghanistan to expand their own positions. This is certainly true in part: The US is withdrawing from Afghanistan in order to transform its global strategy. European allies have little choice but to follow Washington. Thus, from the Chinese and Russian perspectives, the withdrawal from Afghanistan is further evidence of the progressive weakening of the Western alliance. This alone is a boost to Moscow and Beijing, which for years have been calling for the end of a Western-dominated liberal world order. But those who limit the perspectives of both actors to the global level will fall short. For the failure of the West does not automatically mean gains for Beijing and Moscow. After

all, China and Russia must also confront the dangers that could emanate from Afghanistan at the regional level and directly endanger Chinese and Russian interests.

Decline of the West – Beginning of a New World Order

From Moscow's perspective, the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan is an indication of the decline of American hegemony. According to this view, the withdrawal from Afghanistan deepens the crisis of American identity and testifies to the growing instability and vulnerability of Western democracies and their foreign policy. The Western failure in Afghanistan is seen by Moscow as a further milestone on the way



to a multipolar world order in which the US is merely one great power among others and is visibly coming under Chinese pressure.

In the future, a disparate West under weakened American leadership will have to refrain from exporting democracy by means of regime change policies in other regions of the world. The withdrawal of NATO troops is thus symbolic of Washington's new unreliability in relations with its partners and allies around the world — from Russia's point of view, this is a message that in its neighbourhood primarily concerns Ukraine. Russian observers are attentively registering the disappointment of those European NATO partners who were hoping for a renaissance of the transatlantic alliance under the Biden administration in Washington. In Moscow's eyes, the Afghan turmoil proves once again that the European Union (EU) is incapable of acting independently. In this view, the question of whether — and how many — refugees from Afghanistan should be accepted in Europe is putting its cohesion to the test and undermines the European consensus on values. With regard to Afghanistan (and beyond), the stage now belongs to China, Russia, and relevant regional actors such as Pakistan and Iran.

In Beijing, too, the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan is seen as a further indication that “the West is declining and the East is rising”, a narrative that is increasingly used in the context of global systemic rivalry. China also immediately took the US withdrawal from Afghanistan as an opportunity to signal to other countries, including European ones, that they cannot rely on the US. At the same time, this withdrawal also directly affects China, insofar as the US has announced that it will henceforth concentrate its resources on the conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific. The official Chinese narrative often points out that the US and the Europeans left a mess in Afghanistan and now expect China and Russia to bear its costs and consequences. Whether China will cooperate with the US in Afghanistan, however, depends on how the US acts towards China elsewhere (i.e., in the Indo-Pacific).

At the Regional Level, the Dangers Prevail

Below the level of global order issues, multi-layered risks come to the fore, which Moscow and Beijing are now confronted with in Afghanistan.

From the Chinese perspective, the greatest danger is a “spill-over” effect, which could arise from both radical Islamic terrorism and the influx of drugs into China. China's core interest with regard to Afghanistan has long been focused solely on the security of its own borders. This is due on the one hand to the security threats emanating from Afghanistan, and on the other hand to its proximity to the autonomous region of Xinjiang. In Xinjiang, Beijing suspects there are potential Islamist terrorists among the Uighur Muslim minority and has therefore taken a series of new extreme security measures to tighten control over the Uighurs, including so-called re-education camps, which are effectively internment camps. The Chinese government sees terrorist groups — particularly the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which seeks independence for Xinjiang — as the greatest threat to national security.

In this respect, the security situation in Xinjiang is one of the main concerns of the leadership in Beijing. When NATO announced in 2010 that it was ending the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, Beijing had already been questioning whether and how security in Afghanistan could be guaranteed in the long term in the event of a gradual withdrawal of international troops. The threat to China became more tangible after an offshoot of the “Islamic State” (IS) established itself in Afghanistan in 2015. Beijing fears that “ISIS-K” — the “K” standing for the historical region of Khorasan — has also gained a foothold in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province, which borders China, and that a growing number of ETIM supporters are joining the grouping (a parallel to developments in the late 1990s under the then-Taliban rule when radical Islamists supported the separatist movement in Xinjiang from Afghanistan).

Although the only border (which is 76-kilometre-long and located at the eastern end of the Wakhan Corridor) between China and Afghanistan can be easily controlled (since 2017 also by Chinese security personnel on the Afghan side), China is also concerned about other borders, especially with Tajikistan. Due to the difficulty of accessing areas on the border with both Afghanistan and China, Tajikistan is considered a country that offers terrorist groups a particular opportunity to infiltrate Xinjiang. China therefore now conducts joint counterterrorism exercises with Tajikistan, the most recent of which took place 18–20 August, and it has maintained counterterrorism cooperation with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan since 2016.

China has sought dialogue with the Taliban in bilateral and minilateral formats in recent years (since 2016, for example, within the framework of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group together with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the US). These contacts have laid the groundwork for the current exchanges between Beijing and Taliban representatives: At the end of July, Taliban representatives visited China and met with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, in Tianjin. Beijing's calculus here is that, at present, a Taliban government might be the most likely to be able to stabilise the security of China's borders and keep ISIS-K at bay. By welcoming the Taliban to Tianjin, China has signalled that it is quite willing to recognise a Taliban government in Kabul. In return, it can only be assumed, Beijing has received assurances that the Taliban will cooperate with China in order to prevent radical Islamist terrorist groups from entering Xinjiang.

Moscow is pursuing three main goals with its Afghanistan policy: First, the current instability in Afghanistan must not spread beyond its borders into Central Asia. This concerns hostilities, but also flight and migration. The danger of destabilisation of the allied Central Asian republics is of great concern. The current situation also offers Moscow an opportunity to consolidate its position as a security guarantor for the

Central Asian region. A renewed Western presence in Central Asia to stabilise the environment around Afghanistan is explicitly being ruled out in Moscow as undesirable.

Russia has suffered a series of Islamist-motivated terrorist attacks in its recent history and sees the combination of Islamist groups in the Russian North Caucasus, returnees from war zones such as Syria, and transnational terrorist networks as an extremely significant threat. Therefore, secondly, transnational terrorist groups such as ISIS(-K) or al-Qaeda should be prevented from regaining a foothold in Afghanistan and conducting operations from there in Central Asia or Russia. Curbing the trafficking of drugs originating in Afghanistan or transiting the country is the third objective of Russian policy.

Like Beijing, Russia's political leadership sees the new rulers in Kabul as the main contact for the implementation of these primary goals. The Taliban was banned as a terrorist organisation in Russia in 2003. Nevertheless, Moscow began talking to the Taliban as early as the middle of the last decade — at first covertly, then with increasing confidence and in full view of world public opinion. This was one (among many) breakaway movement(s) from Western-dominated diplomatic initiatives. The change in attitude towards the Taliban, however, stemmed primarily from the realisation that they were regaining influence, despite the presence of US and NATO troops. However, Moscow was as surprised by the rapid collapse of the Afghan army as its NATO allies. To this day, there is uncertainty about the character and goals of the movement, and about the possible consequences of its policies for Russia. Moscow follows a *realpolitik* line that is typical of Russian foreign policy and refrains from commenting on the domestic political situation or the human rights situation in Afghanistan. After the capture of Kabul, Russian diplomats were initially positive about the Taliban's first steps. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, however, took a much more critical stance, pointing to the major security risks posed by the new situation in Afghanistan.

Thus, Russian government institutions and security services do not necessarily seem to be united in their assessment of the situation. Nevertheless, there are many indications that Russia will recognise the Taliban and remove them from the national list of terrorist organisations.

Economic Gain?

During their visit to Tianjin at the end of July, the Taliban representatives expressed the hope that China would support their country economically and financially. Indeed, China can offer Afghanistan — and potentially a Taliban government — much more economically than, say, Russia. Chinese media already attribute a role to Afghanistan in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In return, a China-friendly Taliban government could offer Beijing the prospect of exploiting its supposedly immense natural resources (such as copper and lithium).

Whether Afghanistan could actually become part of the BRI (there was already a memorandum of understanding to this effect by China and Afghanistan in 2016) and China will invest heavily in Afghan infrastructure and resource extraction depends primarily on whether the Taliban will be able to stabilise the country. To date, the Taliban does not control all Islamist groups in Afghanistan, and certainly not ISIS-K, which was responsible for the terrorist attack at Kabul airport in August. As long as Chinese investments are fraught with major security risks, Beijing is likely to remain cautious. The question also remains whether the Taliban-led Afghan government will be able to organise the extraction of the country's natural resources. China might have to invest not only in mines, but also significantly in the necessary infrastructure. Another dilemma from the Chinese perspective may also be the cultivation of opium poppies, which is — and is likely to remain — the Taliban's largest single source of income. It is likely to be difficult for any partner of a Taliban government to convince them to give up this lucrative source of income.

There is little doubt in Moscow that China will play the decisive role in Afghanistan's further political and economic development. Economically, Russia has little to offer — as in Syria, it lacks the capacity for reconstruction and development. The extreme instability is also deterring Russian investors. It is not for nothing that Russian discourse revolves almost exclusively around security issues. The Eurasian Economic Union, of which only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are full members anyway, hardly plays a role here.

Conclusion

Beijing and Moscow have so far been aligning their statements and positions on the situation in Afghanistan. On 30 August, by abstaining in the UN Security Council, they allowed for the adoption of a resolution calling on the Taliban to continue letting people leave the country and to not allow Afghanistan to become a safe haven for transnational terrorism. It is likely that they will continue this form of coordination at the international level. The continuing uncertainty prohibits further statements about how Russian and Chinese policy will develop. Provisional conclusions can be drawn, however, with what has been said so far.

■ For the time being, Russia will remain the most important security guarantor in Central Asia through its bilateral relations with the Central Asian states and through the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which it leads. As China focuses on securing its own borders, its involvement is likely to be selective. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Dushanbe on 16–17 September, the situation in Afghanistan dominated the agenda. Although China and Russia agreed that there must be a coordinated approach towards Afghanistan among the SCO members, there was, however, no concrete proposal or road map as to what such a coordinated approach would look like. How intensively Moscow and Beijing cooperate on regional

security issues and whether disagreements on the security situation in Central Asia may arise will depend on how the highly volatile situation in Afghanistan and along its borders develops.

■ Beijing and Moscow will confine themselves primarily to security cooperation in Afghanistan and in the neighbouring region of Central Asia. Even if it had the political will, Russia lacks the economic strength for more far-reaching engagement. Beijing is concentrating on the narrowly defined protection of its security interests and has so far shown no great inclination to take economic risks. The economic integration and stabilisation of Afghanistan within the framework of the BRI is therefore unlikely, at least in the medium term. As rarely seen before, Russian discourse is emphasising China's primacy as a state that is decisive for Afghanistan's economic – and thus also political – future. This speaks for the increasing asymmetry in Russian – Chinese relations.

■ Because China, in particular, has so far shown no interest in any significant economic engagement, Afghanistan will remain dependent on Western humanitarian and development aid in the future. This is also where the greatest potential lies for Germany, or rather the EU, to get involved – to the extent that this is possible with the new Taliban government in Kabul. Beyond that, however, cooperation with Beijing and Moscow would also be desirable. However, the major geopolitical conflict over the orientation of the new world order, which determines Moscow's and Beijing's attitudes towards the US and the EU, will set narrow limits to this. Cooperation with the US and the EU would contradict the "great power" rhetoric that both states are currently using. Both China and Russia are making it clear that they will not solve problems created by the West. Even if cooperation were to materialise, Western actors should not be under the illusion that this rhetoric – and the perceptions associated with it – will change.

■ Moreover, fundamentally different approaches to development cooperation and the fights against terrorism and drugs make any practical cooperation difficult: China and Russia focus on security, Moscow in particular on military means. The EU, on the other hand, has in the past focused on civilian aid, state-building, police reform, and substantial development assistance. For the EU, the task now is to identify possible areas of cooperation with the new Taliban regime and to ensure that, for example, the humanitarian aid announced by the EU also reaches the Afghan population. Whether this can be achieved in cooperation with China and Russia, however, is questionable. In times of systemic rivalry, conflicts and stalemates are more likely than synergies. The more this competition between the US and China (and Russia) intensifies, the narrower the scope will be for actors such as Germany and the EU to cooperate.

On a global level, Russia and China are benefiting from the weakening that the West has been experiencing since the withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, the new situation also confronts them with serious security challenges, for which they have no solutions so far. Western actors must take this into account and should not interpret Chinese and Russian policies only in a geopolitical context. The major conflict with the West overrides the common interest in regional security and will hinder cooperation that could serve the economic and political stabilisation of Afghanistan and its neighbourhood. The EU should nevertheless seek talks with both states, but above all with Beijing – if only to do justice to the responsibility that Western actors bear for the humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan. Russia is a secondary player in this regard and will almost certainly follow China. Limited cooperation could lead to a slow improvement of the situation in Afghanistan – but it cannot be expected to substantially ease relations between the EU, Russia, and China.

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