

# BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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# Afghanistan's Place on the Silk Road

*James J. Coyle*

In a weeklong *blitzkrieg* in August 2021, Taliban forces swept through all of Afghanistan's major cities and captured Kabul. As the American-trained and funded Afghan National Army melted away, the United States and its allies launched a massive airlift out of the country of its friends and forces. As if to emphasize that Gulliver had been bound by the Lilliputians, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) attacked the refugees' main entry point to Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport. The suicide bomber killed 13 U.S. servicemen (the first American fatalities in 18 months) and almost 100 Afghans, including Taliban soldiers guarding the airport periphery.

Pundits quickly seized on America's withdrawal from the world, the demise of the superpower, the fecklessness of American

security guarantees. The same articles were written when the United States abandoned Vietnam 45 years earlier. Since then, the world watched the collapse of the Soviet Union and America's unipolar moment. The critics were wrong in 1975 and are equally wrong in 2021.

The United States remains the world's preeminent superpower. Its nuclear arsenal is only rivaled by Russia; its conventional forces have no real peer competitor. America has a treaty network that spans the globe, and its economy remains the wonder of the world. The crush of would-be-immigrants crowding the country's southern borders are proof that it remains a culture that attracts more than repels. What is missing is the will to exercise any of these elements of national power in Afghanistan, a country in which the United States has no national interests.

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It wasn't always the case. After the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, America had the need to defend its homeland from terrorist attack. And so, in early October 2001 U.S. president George W. Bush announced the commencement of operations against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Within two months, al-Qaeda had been routed from Tora Bora and escaped into Pakistan. With this, the reason for the American invasion no longer existed. In the hills outside the former West German capital of Bonn, working with such unlikely allies as the exiled former King of Afghanistan and the mullahs in Tehran, a loya jirga named the head of the Popalzai tribe of

Durrani Pashtuns, Hamid Karzai, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. From this point on, the future of Afghanistan should have been in the hands of its own citizenry. Instead, it took 20 years for an American president (namely, Joe Biden) to announce his country's disengagement. (In this period, Brown University's Watson Institute recently estimated that the United States spent at least \$2.26 trillion on the war effort in Afghanistan alone, with the total

number of casualties estimated to be between 171,000 and 174,000.) The American troops followed the example of the Soviets (1989), the British (1842, 1880, 1919, 2014), the Mughals (1653), and so on, and removed their troops.

The American and NATO withdrawal has created a power vacuum that worries regional powers and external players. For almost every country with a stake or interest in Afghanistan's future, the

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All would like to see their individual influence expanded in Afghanistan, but none seem to want to emulate the United States and its NATO allies by sending troops. Turkey may have found a unique military niche for its continuing engagement, but for China, the emphasis is on economic expansion; for Iran and Pakistan, it is the diplomatic track. And although Russia is flexing its military muscle, it is doing so from the safety of the other side of Afghanistan's northern border.

### Limited Turkish Presence

Turkey is willing to commit troops to protect the Kabul airport yet has requested payment from the United States for the service. The Taliban have asked for Turkish assistance in running the airport, but insists Turkish troops are unwelcome. The Turks, by contrast have taken the position that Turkish security for Turkish airport workers is a *sine qua non*. Turkey has entered into negotiations with the Taliban, banking that Ankara's position as the only Muslim-majority NATO member state and its previous unwillingness to fight the Taliban in the field will yield positive results. It is also counting on its allies Pakistan and Qatar to help convince the Taliban that Turkish forces should continue their current role of guaranteeing Kabul airport's safety for diplomats, NGOs, aid workers, and so on.

Turkey does not appear to have any direct interest in Afghanistan itself; rather, it appears the offer to protect the airport is part of an effort to smooth American feathers ruffled by closer Turkish-Russian ties. Turkey has already said it

will not reverse its purchase of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system, and Washington has reiterated it will not remove sanctions. Thus, the entrenchment of an expeditionary force at the Kabul airport appears to be something of value the Turks can provide to the Biden Administration.

### China's Play

The Chinese have not been eager to see the Americans' withdrawal—an interesting development given Beijing's initial opposition to the 2001 American intervention. Beijing appears to recognize that the presence of American troops in its backyard has provided tangible benefits by keeping Islamist militants at bay. While China is glad to see the back of Uncle Sam, it would have liked for the departure to be delayed until the situation was stabilized. China has no real interest in involving itself militarily in its neighbor's territory.

Beijing has been in touch with the current Afghan government for about five years, trying to expand the Belt and Road

Initiative into that country. Reportedly, Chinese advances at that time were rebuffed after the Afghan government received heavy pressure from the Indians and Americans. With America's presence in Afghanistan gone, there is now a tremendous opportunity upon which the Chinese can capitalize.

If the area were to stabilize, China would expand its economic interests in the country from the meager investment of \$2.2 million in 2016. Beijing is particularly interested in expanding the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This is a series of highways, railways, and energy pipelines that would connect China and its long-term ally Pakistan to Afghanistan. One of the first steps in this project would be the construction of a Chinese financed Kabul-Peshawar highway. To make sure its economic expansion is not interrupted by a change in governments, China is also in frequent contact with Taliban officials. Apparently, China has been an arms supplier to the Taliban since 1996, and there are reports of secret contacts with the Taliban-allied Haqqani network to deny sanctuary to the Uighurs. Recent attacks, such as on a bus carrying nine Chinese engineers, demonstrate that the relationship is fraught with difficulties.

China is also interested in Afghanistan's natural resources. It already has a 30-year contract to extract copper from a mine at Mes Aynak. China would also like to tie up Afghan supplies of gold and lithium. (One estimate is that China already controls 51 percent of all lithium in the world).

### Pakistan's Interest

As Chinese plans are dependent on regional stability, and it has no plans to ensure that stability with its own troops, Beijing is pinning its hopes on Pakistan. Islamabad has had longstanding ties with the Taliban, even allowing the Taliban to maintain a presence in Quetta after it fled Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Foreign minister Wang Yi has encouraged Pakistan to maintain the regional peace "together" with China.

Pakistan's interests are primarily defensive. Having long supported the Taliban in the hope that Afghanistan would give it strategic depth in its perpetual struggle with India, the support has been a two-edged sword. The former Afghan government asked Pakistan repeatedly to take practical steps to close down Taliban support bases and bring the rebel group into negotiations. These were

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demands that Islamabad neither could nor would meet. In fact, at least one report had Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate summoning Taliban leaders in Spring 2021 and directing them to launch military operations against the former Afghan government.

Having supported the Taliban all these years, Pakistan now finds itself on the verge of having a fundamentalist regime on its doorstep—a case of discovering that sometimes one's wishes should not come true. Taliban military successes are already emboldening Pakistan's own Islamists to challenge the government. Further, ISIS-K (the group challenging the Taliban for not being fundamentalist enough) are loosely aligned with the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a group dedicated to the overthrow of the government in Islamabad. Pakistan is also concerned that unrest in Afghanistan could lead to a wave of refugees for whom they would be responsible under international law.

Islamabad has emphasized that a diplomatic solution is necessary to bring stability. To that end, it sponsored the peace talks in Qatar that led to the September 2020 disengagement agreement. Qatar was the logical place for these talks to take place since it was one of only three countries that recognized the Taliban the last time it was in power—and they have maintained an office in Doha for many years. Recently, Qatar urged both sides to accept third-party mediation. Qatar is the home of the Al-Jazeera cable and satellite television news network, and there may be an ideological element in Doha's willingness to allow talks on Qatari territory. More likely, however, Qatar prides itself as being a credible, neutral arbiter in conflict situations.

Biden's failure to meet the withdrawal deadline agreed upon by Donald Trump, his predecessor in the White House, coupled with Biden's subsequent decision to withdraw unilaterally, appeared to have killed the diplomatic track. The Taliban's cooperation with the United States in assisting with the

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Kabul evacuation demonstrates that not all hope for diplomacy has been lost. Pakistan has not abandoned diplomacy. Aware that a Taliban government will want international recognition, it has pretended that the talks in Doha were fruitful and ongoing. As an example, when Biden announced his unilateral withdrawal, Pakistan's foreign office said the decision coincided with progress in the peace talks. Pakistan's efforts at peace talks earned it brownie points in Washington; important because the resumption of American military aid is a top priority of Pakistan's powerful military high command. Needing to appease the Taliban, however, Pakistan has also stated it will not allow the United States to station troops on its soil after their withdrawal from Afghanistan.

### *The Role of Iran*

Afghanistan's other neighbor is Iran, whose then-foreign minister Javad Zarif met with Taliban representatives in order to secure promises that the Taliban would not attack groups

protected under Sharia law: civilians, schools, mosques, and hospitals. This was particularly important to Iran given that its consulate in Mazar-e Sharif was wiped out by the Taliban in 1998. (Shia are considered a heretical sect by strict Sunni Islamists). Eight Iranian diplomats and a journalist were killed in that attack. Because of this—note that the Taliban have always denied responsibility for the attack—Tehran's overtures to the Taliban are meeting opposition within Iran from regime stalwarts such as Grand Ayatollah Saafi Golpaygani. Iran's interest in the Taliban comes from its desire to defeat ISIS-K. Despite numerous Iranian overtures to Kabul, former President Ashraf Ghani had been unable to stop the ISIS-K from using Afghanistan as a safe haven from which to launch attacks into Iran.

At its heart, Iran did not want to see a Taliban victory, fearing it would only add to the millions of Afghan refugees already on Iranian soil. In addition, Iran needs a window to trade and circumvent U.S. sanctions, something the

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previous Afghan government gave them. The Taliban’s victory might result in the imposition of sanctions on Afghanistan, which would close this crucial opening to the world economy. There is also an ideological underpinning at play, since Tehran has long presented itself as the defender of Shia rights around the world. Almost half of Afghanistan is populated by the Shia Hazara minority, who were deeply oppressed the last time the Taliban was in power. As a result, Zarif discussed with the former Afghan government the possibility of using Iranian proxy fighters from Hezbollah and Hamas to prop up the regime against Taliban advances. (The suggestion was met with silence.)

### The Russian Gaze

Russia applauded Taliban victories in northern Afghanistan because they share a common foe (the Islamic State), and the Kremlin believed the

military campaign demonstrated American security guarantees could not be replied upon. Taliban victories were perceived as gains for the countries of Central Asia that have grown dependent on Russia for security guarantees. At the same time, Russia expressed concern over the growing regional insecurity. Former Afghan Army troops have become a potentially destabilizing force by fleeing across Afghanistan’s northern border to escape capture (and possible death). Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan all mobilized their forces. Tajikistan is a member of the Russian-backed Collective Security Organization and houses Russia’s largest foreign military base—with 7,000 troops stationed there permanently. Russia has begun holding military maneuvers including tanks in the countries bordering Afghanistan and has reinforced Tajik forces with armored personnel carriers.

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United States out of its post-Soviet military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Moscow is not eager to welcome American counterterrorist forces into its sphere of influence. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov bluntly warned the Americans in Geneva: “The redeployment of the American permanent military presence to the countries neighboring Afghanistan is unacceptable. We told the Americans in a direct and straightforward way that it would change a lot of things not only in our perceptions of what’s going on in that important region, but also in our relations with the United States.”

By contrast, the Russians have offered the Americans the use of their own bases in Central Asia for intelligence gathering, according to the daily newspaper *Kommersant*. At the Geneva summit, Russian president Vladimir Putin supposedly told Biden that Russian bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan should be put to practical use, possibly including an exchange of information derived from drones. It is not the presence of American troops in

Central Asia to which the Kremlin objects, but troops whose presence is authorized by national governments instead of Moscow.

Another way to put this is that Russia has denied the countries of Central Asia their sovereignty. Does Uzbekistan want American support against terrorists? Is Kyrgyzstan willing to reopen Manas to American troops? It doesn’t matter. Regardless of the views and opinions of the governments of these captive nations, Moscow has already decided that the Kremlin alone will make such decisions.

Russian efforts to play all sides against each other is the Kremlin’s *modus operandi* at the conclusion of hostilities throughout the Silk Road region. Probably the most egregious example of this was in Georgia in 1993. Russian forces fought on the side of Abkhaz rebels against the central government, until Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze met a major Russian foreign policy goal: the president announced that Georgia would join the Moscow-backed

Commonwealth of Independent States. Having achieved their goal, Russian troops reversed their role and fired on the Abkhazians. They were then able to maintain their presence in Georgia as “peacekeepers” until the 2008 war.

In Moldova, the Russians maintained correct diplomatic relations with Chisinau even as its 14<sup>th</sup> Army fought on the side of the Transnistrian rebels. The result was a “peacekeeping” force consisting of one-third Moldovan, one-third Transnistrian, and one-third Russian—meaning Moscow controls two-thirds of any vote.

In Ukraine, relations are cold but correct with Kyiv, even as the Russian-supported breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk try to destroy the state. Putin gave the Ukrainians a peace plan to which all sides agreed; yet the sides cannot agree on sequencing of the steps, meaning there is little chance for agreement. This keeps Moscow in the position of kingmaker. Russia denies its direct involvement in the conflict, despite Putin’s admission that the “little green men” in Crimea were Russian special forces, and despite NATO evidence that Russian troops directly intervened in the fighting in February 2015 when it appeared that Ukrainian troops would win against the rebels.

In Azerbaijan’s formerly-occupied Karabakh region, Russia has been both a Co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group and the sponsor of unilateral peace efforts. Russia claimed to be neutral in the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict, despite evidence that Russian troops fought on both sides in the First Karabakh War. Since then, Russia has used the threat of Turkish intervention on behalf of Azerbaijan as justification to house 5,000 Russian troops on Armenian soil. It gave weaponry to Armenia while selling \$6 billion worth of munitions to Azerbaijan. It would be difficult to affirm that Russia invested the maximum of its diplomatic influence to bring the sides together.

When Russia’s allies in Yerevan (the followers of termed-out president Serzh Sarkisyan) were defeated at the polls in May 2018, it turned a blind eye when fighting erupted in September 2020. After a 44-day conflict—known as the Second Karabakh War—Azerbaijan regained control over all seven districts surrounding the former Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast as well as the city of Shusha and some other geographies in the aforementioned former oblast itself. In the Russian-brokered peace deal, Azerbaijan agreed to allow a Russian peacekeeping contingent of 1,960 to take control

of the rest from the ethnic-Armenian forces. Of particular note is that Russian troops are now stationed along the 5 km-wide Lachin corridor connecting this Russian peacekeeping zone, which contains a small ethnic-Armenian population, with Armenia.

Russians are also supposed to protect a transport corridor through Armenia’s Syunik province that will link Azerbaijan with its exclave of Nakhchivan. Having achieved its goal of placing Russian troops back into Azerbaijan (from which they had been previously expelled), Moscow does not appear to have done much to bring into existence what in Azerbaijani terminology is called the Zangezur corridor. No matter who wins on the battlefield, Russia always wins at the peace table.

If Armenia is willing to enter into economic relations with other countries in the region, then this would provide a missing piece in a continental transportation corridor across the Silk Road region designed to connect Europe and East Asia. This would stand a chance

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of benefitting all concerned. If Armenia decides to reopen its borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan (for instance, as part of a peace treaty), it could become a valuable road and rail transit route for freight and passengers uniting the Caspian with the Mediterranean.

Afghanistan plays a similar role east of the Caspian. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline has been on the drawing board for years; the Taliban is on record that they would protect the pipeline because of its potential importance to Afghanistan’s economic well-being. Similarly, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative would benefit: achieving CPEC’s full potential is ultimately dependent on the establishment of stability in Afghanistan.

### *Stability Prognosis?*

The short-term prognosis for such stability is not good. Taliban leaders say they have learned their lessons and that they will not repeat their predecessors’

past mistakes. They have given promises to protect women, not oppress the Shia, and to crack-down on heroin traffickers. If they uphold these promises, they face internal opposition from ISIS-K that considers such actions heretical. Given the group’s ideological beliefs and its track record of executing internal opponents, such reassurances should be taken with a grain of salt. Memories are long in this part of the world, and the excesses of the 1990s will not be easily forgotten.

In the longer-term, however, there is a glimmer of hope. The very things that have regional powers worried are the seeds for their solution. Russia, the Central Asian states, Iran, and China are all concerned that an Afghanistan without the Americans will become a haven for Islamist militants. Russia has agreements (unilateral or multilateral) with all the surrounding states. Russia and China announced that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will begin counterterrorist cooperation. It will not be easy, but it is conceivable that a grand counterterrorist alliance could be formed.

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Economic cooperation may come easier. China founded the SCO, and its members include Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Iran and Afghanistan are both Observer States. (By the time of publication of this article, the SCO may have accepted Iran into full membership). This provides a backbone for potential economic cooperation and could evolve into a free trade zone. According to liberal economic theory, increased trade flows among the various member and observer states would lead to both prosperity and stability. The former Afghan government previously expressed interest in such cooperation through its economic talks with the Chinese and its desire to construct the TAPI pipeline. Similarly, the Taliban’s promise to protect such a pipeline indicates they

also desire economic cooperation with at least some of Afghanistan’s surrounding states.

If TAPI were to come to fruition, it would be a game-changer for Afghanistan.

Nicknamed the “peace pipeline” because it would give common interests to rival powers in South Asia, the agreements call for the construction of an 1814-km pipeline to deliver 33 billion cubic meters of Turkmen natural gas to countries along the route, including an allotment of 5 billion bcm to Afghanistan.

In addition, Afghanistan would receive between \$400 and \$500 million of transit fees annually. Just as the 1994 “Contract of the Century” to construct the 1,768 km-long Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and export Caspian hydrocarbon resources to the West raised Azerbaijan’s economy, the influx of energy and transit fees to Afghanistan could propel its economic development.

Admittedly, short-term instability may endanger long-term diplomatic stability: if Afghanistan descends into a civil war as it did in the 1990s, the Taliban could fail to gain

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diplomatic recognition. The West is unlikely to bestow its blessing on a government that engage in war crimes. Similarly, regional powers and external actors could become divided as countries choose sides in a conflict. Russia, China, and Iran have kept their diplomatic missions open in Kabul, however, indicating a willingness to

work with the new government. In either case, diplomacy would fail to provide the band-aid that would hold the country together.

The Taliban’s success in recapturing Afghanistan may have profound effects on the populace. Although the Taliban have said they will not introduce all the draconian measures they did in the 1990s, their return to power is certainly resulting in the restoration of a more conservative/traditionalist society. As an example, the Taliban has said it will respect women’s rights as long as they conform to Sharia law. At the same time,

however, women should not work or leave their houses for their own safety. The ideological divide between the West and the Taliban is wide.

The EU fears the Taliban will reintroduce a draconian form of Sharia law, including the subjugation of women, but they will be powerless to counter these events. The United States is withdrawing from South Asia except for a skeletal counterterrorist presence. It will condemn Taliban excesses, apply sanctions, but do nothing. When a U.S. president responds to a terrorist attack with the promise of retaliation “at a time and place of our choosing,” it means it has no plans or capabilities readily available. China is only concerned about internal stability and external economic growth: it will ignore the ideology of any ruling party, as it does in Africa. Other than a largely-declarative concern for the protection of human rights and the maintenance of stability, it appears that most external players to the Afghanistan drama care little about whether the Taliban rules in Kabul or not.

*Looking to Moscow, Again*

That leaves Moscow, still concerned about terrorism on its southern borders. Russia bears the scars of the Soviet Union’s intervention in the 1980s: 13,310 soldiers killed, 35,478 wounded, and 311 missing (by contrast, estimates of Afghan dead in that war range from 562,000 to 2 million). That war also resulted in large numbers of Red Army soldiers addicted to heroin. This problem was compounded when the United States invaded Afghanistan, as the Taliban became dependent on opium production for their income. The main route for exporting drugs to their customers in the West was through the Central Asian states and Russia. This led to an increased role for Russian organized crime as well as an increased number of Russian addicts.

The ISIS-K attack on the Kabul airport may serve as a rallying point for the international community: Taliban, Russia, China, Iran, and the West are opposed to ISIS-K expanding its influence.

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Gaining Taliban support will require considerable work from the international community. An indigenous force that reconquered Kabul with Western aid, the new government would like to gain access to Afghanistan’s funds held in foreign banks but has survived 20 years in exile without them.

Despite its bad experience 40 years ago, the Kremlin might be willing to involve itself more directly

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in stabilizing the country through diplomatic and economic interventions. Moscow has already proven itself adept at supporting all sides in various conflicts in the former Soviet space as well as in using the support it receives as a result to further Russian foreign policy goals. Since stability is a Russian goal in the area, the Kremlin may hold the key for a more peaceful Afghan future. **BD**

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