

SECURITY IN THE HEARTLAND: NAVIGATING RUSSIA, CHINA, AND CENTRAL ASIA'S INTERACTION WITH THE TALIBAN 2.0

POLICY BRIEF

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Introduction

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan after the U.S. and NATO's withdrawal in August 2021 has shifted regional and global security dynamics. Afghanistan, a historical crossroads, is now a focal point of geopolitical competition. The power vacuum left by the U.S. and its allies has been filled by regional actors like Russia, China, and Central Asia, each engaging with the Taliban based on strategic, economic, and security priorities.

For Russia, the Taliban's resurgence raises concerns about Central Asia and the rise of extremist groups like ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). China's focus is economic, with Afghanistan as a key part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and a source of rare minerals. Still, it also worries about the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Central Asian countries sharing borders with Afghanistan face more direct challenges. Uzbekistan values Afghanistan for regional connectivity, while Turkmenistan focuses on energy projects like the TAPI gas pipeline. Tajikistan has security concerns, especially regarding its Tajik population, while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan engage through security groups like CSTO despite not sharing borders.

Globally, the Taliban's return threatens stability, human rights, and anti-terrorism efforts. For Canada, Afghanistan's instability poses risks to regional allies and global security, particularly with the potential resurgence of terrorism. The Taliban's restrictive policies undermine decades of international human rights efforts.

This memo examines the interactions of Russia, China, and Central Asia with the Taliban and offers recommendations for Canada on security, humanitarian, and economic issues in Afghanistan.

Statement of Problem

The Taliban's resurgence to power in 2021 has created an environment filled with opportunities and threats on national, regional, and international levels. For example, the following points can be noted for Eurasian powers:

- **Security Challenges:** With the Taliban's presence in Afghanistan, extremist groups such as ISIS-K, IMU, and ETIM have heightened the risks of transnational terrorism. Instability in Afghanistan allows these regional extremist groups the opportunity to reorganize and expand their influence in the region and beyond.
- **Geopolitical Tensions:** Russia and China are attempting to fill the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of the United States and NATO from Afghanistan. These two major powers are simultaneously grappling with their conflicting interests in Eurasia.
- **Fragile Governance:** The Taliban's inability to form an inclusive government and their failure to curb extremist threats while continuing to engage with Islamic groups like Al-Qaeda complicates international interactions with them.

On the other hand, the absence of coordinated regional efforts has reduced the effectiveness of individual anti-terrorism measures by the countries in the region, leading to increased regional instability. This disparity in approaches ultimately poses threats to neighbouring countries and impacts global security.



Figure 1: Afghanistan and the Region

Context

The return of the Taliban has transformed Afghanistan into a focal point of security concerns in Eurasia, and the relative stability that has emerged following their presence has created both opportunities and challenges for regional and international actors. Afghanistan's geostrategic position as a bridge connecting South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East plays a key role in regional stability and economic integration. However, the reciprocal perceptions of the Taliban and the regional countries have exposed gaps and challenges in regional cooperation centred around Afghanistan. Russia, China, and Central Asian countries, while having relatively common goals in engaging with the Taliban, each follow diverse

approaches towards the regime. While the policies of these countries focus on maintaining their own security and regional stability, varying priorities and levels of engagement with the Taliban can be observed.

Russia: Fragile Geopolitics and Security Priorities

Russia views Afghanistan as crucial for its influence in Central Asia and its efforts to counter Western dominance. Moscow's strategy under the Taliban rule is based on four main concerns: preventing the spread of extremism to Central Asia, stabilizing its regional sphere of influence, countering Western influence, and pursuing economic interests.

- **Controlling Extremism:** Russia perceives Afghanistan as a potential hub for extremist groups, including ISIS-K and IMU. These groups pose a direct threat to Central Asian countries like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which act as Russia's strategic buffer against instability. To mitigate these risks, Russia pragmatically engages with the Taliban but refrains from official recognition. Moscow expects the Taliban to restrict the activities of extremist groups within Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's ability to completely suppress these groups remains questionable as ISIS-K continues to expand its activities in northern Afghanistan.
- **Regional Influence and Power Maneuvers:** Over the last three centuries, Afghanistan has been an integral part of Russia's broader geopolitical ambitions in the region and the past three decades, particularly in Central Asia. Following the withdrawal of the United States and NATO in 2021, Moscow has positioned itself as a regional security provider. Through mechanisms such as CSTO and the Moscow format consultations, Russia strengthens its role as a guarantor of stability in Afghanistan and the region. By hosting regional meetings that include Taliban representatives, Russia seeks to showcase its leadership while simultaneously preventing Western influence in Afghanistan's affairs.
- **Economic Interests and Pragmatism:** While Russia's priorities in Afghanistan are primarily focused on security issues, Moscow also has secondary economic interests. Russia has explored opportunities for collaboration in energy and infrastructure projects, including transit routes and resource extraction. However, challenges related to Taliban governance, international isolation, and the lack of adequate infrastructure have limited the feasibility of these projects. Russia remains cautious in its deep economic engagements and prefers a "wait and see" approach, which aligns with its broader strategy of pragmatic diplomacy.
- **Countering the West:** Russia views the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan as a geopolitical victory that reinforces the Russian narrative of the "decline of the West." Moscow leverages the rise of the Taliban to undermine the credibility of the United States as a security provider while simultaneously consolidating its influence in Central Asia. However, Russia is also cautious about China's increasing economic presence in Afghanistan, as this could challenge Russia's traditional dominance in the region. Moscow's balanced approach reflects its desire to maintain regional hegemony while cooperating with China to address shared security threats.

China: Balancing Economic Ambitions and Security Priorities (Pragmatism and Strategic Goals)

China's engagement with the Taliban 2.0 reflects its extensive Eurasian ambitions, particularly through BRI. For Beijing, stabilizing Afghanistan is crucial for both its economic projects and addressing domestic and regional security concerns.

- **Security Priorities:** China's primary concern is the threat from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which seeks to destabilize Xinjiang. Given Afghanistan's history as a haven for insurgent groups, China has secured commitments from the Taliban to suppress ETIM. However, the Taliban's ability to fulfill these promises is uncertain, as groups like ISIS-Khorasan continue to operate in Afghanistan.
- **Economic Opportunities:** Afghanistan's vast mineral resources, including lithium, copper, and rare earth elements, present significant opportunities for China. With global demand for lithium growing, China has already signed agreements to extract resources, including oil and gold. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to integrate Afghanistan into regional supply chains, with infrastructure projects like railways and energy pipelines boosting trade between Central Asia and South Asia.
- **Diplomatic Engagements:** China takes a pragmatic approach, engaging with the Taliban diplomatically while not officially recognizing them as the legitimate government. China supports the release of Afghan financial assets and increased humanitarian aid to stabilize Afghanistan. By cooperating with regional partners like Russia and Pakistan, China seeks to stabilize Afghanistan, counter Western influence, and strengthen its economic and geopolitical interests through multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).



Figure 2: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

- **Central Asian Countries: Immediate Challenges and Diverse Strategies** Central Asian countries, especially Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, which have direct borders, ethnic homogeneity, and historical relations with Afghanistan, face immediate security and economic challenges under Taliban rule. However, as will be discussed, the response of the five Central Asian countries to the Taliban's presence in Afghanistan varies based on their internal concerns, geopolitical alignments, and economic priorities:
 - **Tajikistan** has two main concerns: the status of Tajiks in Afghanistan within the power structure under the Taliban and concerns about the Taliban's links with armed opposition groups in Tajikistan (such as Ansarullah), which are primarily based in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province. Additionally, due to Tajikistan's support for the Resistance Front led by Ahmad Massoud and hosting several Taliban opponents in Dushanbe, which has prompted serious warnings from the Taliban, the country is sensitive to Taliban influence in northern Afghanistan and has concerns about its border security.
 - **Uzbekistan** has adopted a pragmatic approach towards the Taliban, emphasizing economic engagement and regional connectivity. Projects such as the Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway, which aims to turn Afghanistan into a transit hub between Central and South Asia, are important for Tashkent. Tashkent also prioritizes border security and

- intelligence cooperation to counter the activities of ISIS-K and IMU. Additionally, Uzbekistan is somewhat concerned about the position of Uzbeks in Afghanistan's power structure. Still, this concern is not as pronounced as the similar concern for Tajiks in Afghanistan in Tajikistan.
- **Turkmenistan**, in its dealings with the Taliban, focuses more on its energy interests, particularly the TAPI pipeline. As one of the first countries to engage with the Taliban after their return, Turkmenistan seeks to ensure its economic investments in the TAPI project and simultaneously maintains its policy of neutrality. While Turkmenistan is interested in the presence of Turkmen from Afghanistan in the power structure, it is also satisfied with the presence of Taliban Turkmen in some lower ranks of power.
 - **Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan**, which do not have direct border adjacency with Afghanistan, perceive a safer margin for themselves. Therefore, these two countries have adopted a cautious and indirect approach towards the Taliban, mainly connecting with the Taliban and Afghanistan through regional security frameworks like CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Both countries prioritize intelligence sharing and cooperation in counter-terrorism efforts and prefer to keep direct political engagement to a minimum.

Policy Summary

The Taliban's return has made Afghanistan a central point of security concerns in Eurasia, presenting both opportunities and challenges for regional and international actors. Its geostrategic location links South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, making it crucial for regional stability and economic integration. However, the involvement of Russia, China, and Central Asia with the Taliban highlights regional rifts as each pursues diverging goals.

For Russia, Afghanistan serves as a buffer against extremism in Central Asia, crucial for its geopolitical influence. Russia seeks to prevent terrorism and drug trafficking while maintaining dominance in Central Asian security, though its efforts are complicated by instability in Afghanistan and China's rising influence.

China sees Afghanistan through the lens of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), focusing on economic opportunities like minerals and trade. However, security concerns about groups like ETIM and instability affecting Xinjiang make Beijing cautious, emphasizing economic ties over political involvement.

Central Asian countries, with their proximity and historical ties to Afghanistan, face the greatest impact. Uzbekistan prioritizes connectivity projects like the Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway, while Turkmenistan focuses on energy security with the TAPI pipeline. Tajikistan is concerned about Taliban alliances with anti-Tajik insurgents, while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan engage through multilateral frameworks like SCO and CSTO.

While regional actors share common goals of stability and security, their differing approaches weaken coordinated responses to threats like terrorism, drug trafficking,

and refugee flows, highlighting the need for collaborative frameworks to address Afghanistan's challenges.

Policy Implications for Canada:

While Russia, China, and Central Asian countries share common goals in terms of security and stability, their divergent approaches weaken regional coordination. These differences may allow extremist groups to exploit governance gaps and border vulnerabilities, threatening regional and international security. These challenges provide opportunities for Canada to contribute to regional stability, humanitarian aid, and counter-terrorism efforts.

Policy Recommendations for Canada:

Canada has significant interests in reducing security threats and humanitarian crises related to Afghanistan. Canadian policymakers aiming to expand influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia and to defend human rights with a focus on women's rights can pursue the following actions:

1. Support for Regional Security Efforts:

- Engage with regional organizations like SCO to share intelligence and strengthen coordinated counter-terrorism strategies.
- Provide targeted technical assistance to Central Asian countries to enhance border security and combat extremist networks active along the Afghan borders.
- Encourage regional dialogue on developing a unified Eurasian security mechanism to address transnational threats from the Taliban source.

2. Promoting Humanitarianism and Supporting Human Rights with a dedicated focus on Afghan women's rights both within and outside Afghanistan through the United Nations and other International Human Rights Institutions:

- Recognize Afghanistan as a gender apartheid regime under international law, where the Taliban's systematic and institutionalized oppression of Afghan women and girls constitutes a form of apartheid akin to the racial apartheid regime of South Africa.
- In alignment with Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), lead international dialogue efforts by fostering strategic partnerships with multilateral institutions, Afghan women-led organizations, and other diaspora networks to amplify Afghan women's knowledge and voices in shaping global responses to Afghanistan's gender apartheid regime.
- Support UN-backed mechanisms that monitor human rights violations under the Taliban regime, with a priority of protecting women, children, journalists, and minorities. Advocate for Afghan women's inclusion in UN peace processes, negotiations, and work on the ground in Afghanistan.
- Continue supporting initiatives related to the refugee acceptance process from Afghanistan.

3. Combating Extremism and Strengthening Resilience in Central Asia:

- Fund educational programs and skill development in Central Asian countries to counter the recruitment of extremists, especially among vulnerable youth.
- Support regional media campaigns to counter extremist propaganda and promote alternative narratives that challenge extremist ideologies. Particularly, assists in creating an alternative narrative of Islamic governance as opposed to the radical narrative of Taliban governance.
- Develop social resilience programs that address the roots of extremism, such as poverty, unemployment, and injustice across the region.

4. **Strengthening Canada's Diplomatic Role:**

- Establish Canada's position as a neutral mediator to enhance dialogue between Russia, China, and Central Asian countries regarding shared interests in Afghanistan's stability with a focus on supporting women's rights and humanitarian issues.
- Utilize Canada's leadership in multilateral forums such as the Group of Seven (G7), the United Nations, and NATO to align global strategies on Afghanistan and highlight regional security risks.
- Strengthen democratic processes that oppose the Taliban in Canada and around the world and help to coordinate among them.

6. **Addressing Refugee and Migration Challenges:**

- Expand Canada's resettlement programs for Afghan refugees, prioritizing vulnerable groups such as women, civil activists, university professors, and journalists.
- Collaborate with Central Asian countries to support refugee camps through financial and logistical aid to alleviate regional migration pressures.

Broader Recommendations for Eurasia:

To strengthen stability in Eurasia, Canada can encourage the following regional actions:

- **Strengthen Regional Security Mechanisms:** Promote a regional task force under the supervision of SCO to monitor extremist activities, coordinate responses, and secure borders.
- **Invest in Economic Stability:** Support multilateral economic projects that integrate Afghanistan into regional markets, aiming to create mutual economic dependencies and shared stability.
- **Counter Extremist Narratives:** Launch regional media campaigns to challenge the extremist ideologies of the Taliban and strengthen resilience against radicalization.