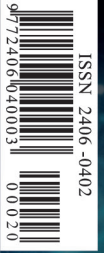


WINTER 2022 / ISSUE NO.20

\$ 15.00 | € 10.00 | 1500 RSD

HORIZONS

JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



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AFTER THE AFGHAN WAR

THE U.S., RUSSIA, AND THE CHANGING SECURITY DYNAMICS IN EURASIA

Maxim A. Suchkov

THE foreign policy of the United States under the Biden Administration is developing under the influence of four factors that has been taking shape since the mid-2000s. *First*, the return of great power confrontation; *second*, the rise of a more competitive international environment (as compared to 1990s); *three*, changed American priorities in the European, Middle Eastern, and post-Soviet theaters, respectively; and *four*, the increased significance of the Indo-Pacific for American strategic, military, and economic interests.

For most of the twentieth century, the main endeavor of American strategy consisted in reshaping Europe: Western Europe after World War II and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the Soviet Union. To achieve this goal, the United States formulated a big idea—the “transatlantic community”—and established an

institution that was supposed to cement and frame this idea: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As a result of this effort, the United States successfully secured its military presence near one of its most important geopolitical adversaries whilst ensuring its political influence over a core group of developed states located in the Old Continent. Regardless of the various internecine disagreements that have been made manifest in the recent past, the transatlantic community still constitutes the backbone of the global American system of alliances whose significance has only increased in the new era of rivalry with China.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks at the dawn of the twenty-first century triggered a similar attempt on part of the United States to remake the Middle East. The idea of constructing a “Greater Middle East” from Morocco to Afghanistan failed at its implementation stages,

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Photo: Guiver Image/Getty Images

U.S. soldiers departing Kabul airport as part of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, 31 August 2021

as did numerous attempts to create some sort of “Arab NATO.” The ultimate consequences of this political experiment turned out to be catastrophic for the region and still casts a haunting shadow over U.S. policymaking. In both cases—Europe and the Middle East—the official motivation behind the American push was to transform the particular part of the world from which the United States felt threatened—in the former case, the USSR; in the latter, “international terrorism”—and in so doing eliminate the very source of the respective threat.

The rapid growth of China—which has taken place simultaneous to the

weakening of the international position of the United States and the deepening of America’s internal crises—prompted Washington to preemptively counter the threat emanating from Beijing. This is the struggle that is likely to define the fate of the twenty-first century. Building on America’s previous endeavors in Europe and the Middle East, a process of “renovating” South and East Asia is taking shape under U.S. leadership within the framework of a new big idea: the construction of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Region. This is now being accompanied by the establishment of security pacts and institutions designed to promote and defend the idea like

the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and, more recently, AUKUS (the former is composed of America, Australia, India, and Japan; the latter of America, Australia, and the United Kingdom).

America's "playbook" for countering China is largely derived from the strategy and tactics used to contain the Soviet Union. This is only natural, since the United States has no other experience of great-power confrontation. In a similar fashion, America singles out key allies whose economic and technological potential as well as political weight and loyalty to Washington make them both the fulcrum of the American presence in respective regions and the "agents of forward containment" of the main enemy.

During the Cold War, such countries were Germany in the West, Japan in the East, and Turkey in the South (the latter due to geopolitical rather than economic and technological characteristics). Today, it may be Russia, the EU, India, Japan, and Australia (and to some extent South Korea) that are seen as being critical for the United States to engage in its confrontation with China. This new rivalry also requires America

to concentrate more resources on its China policy, which, in turn, demands American retrenchment from some of the regions that devour too many of its resources and attention. This appears to be the logic behind Donald Trump's intention to end America's "forever wars" during his term as U.S. president.

And this ended up being the logic informing the decision of his successor, Joe Biden, to withdraw America's military presence from Afghanistan.

FROM COUNTER TERRORISM TO GREAT POWER RIVALRY

The American departure from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 is a case for both continuity and change in American politics. The decision to leave Afghanistan was made long before Biden came to office—the Forty-Seventh President of the United States just executed the decision his predecessors had sought yet failed to implement for various reasons. As an outside observer of American politics, it strikes me that Biden's 31 August 2021 address announcing the "end of the war in Afghanistan" could easily have been delivered, for the most part, by his predecessor. Much of the speech was about national egoism; little was devoted to explicating the responsibilities of a superpower.

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This attitude is nevertheless understandable: the U.S. has long been experiencing "Afghanistan fatigue" and most American citizens have no regrets in having left the turmoil behind. But it also shows that just like past U.S. president, Biden operates in three primary capacities concurrently: as a party politician, as a manager of a large bureaucracy, and as a military commander-in-chief.

As a politician, his primary interest is to maximize the chances for his party to win the next elections—both for the U.S. Congress and the executive office. Although it is too early to assess the prospects for the Democrat Party on this subject, the withdrawal from Afghanistan is unlikely to impact on voter preferences. The Republican Party will certainly try to make the most of this situation by playing the Biden's lame leadership" card to its fullest. Still, the Afghanistan story arc is unlikely to play a large role in whether the Democrats lose or win the 2022 midterms or the 2024 presidential race. There are a lot more important issues for American voters, including the state of the economy, rising inflation, heightened spending on infrastructure, illegal migration, and various pandemic-related issues. The battle for

American high offices is most likely to be won or lost on these fronts.

Biden may have failed as a manager of bureaucracy: the pullout from Afghanistan appeared to have been poorly coordinated and awfully executed.

But in that particular decision chain, his thinking was most probably dominated by his third role—that of commander-in-chief.

In this last capacity, Biden's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan truly ended an era that began with 9/11. The fight against terrorism is no longer the

Biden's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan truly ended an era that began with 9/11. The fight against terrorism is no longer the defining paradigm of American security and foreign policy.

defining paradigm of American security and foreign policy. The United States is moving—or returning—to a great-power standoff with China and, partly, Russia. Many in Washington believe it is the fight that will determine the fate of humanity in the twenty-first century. Moreover, by withdrawing the American military contingent, the United States does not intend to reduce its intelligence capabilities in the region. On the contrary, the Americans are now championing amongst themselves the need to deploy additional intelligence resources in adjacent territories under the official pretext of monitoring possible terrorist activity in Afghanistan and tracking the character of the Taliban's relations with other Islamists.

But such an intelligence infrastructure, many in Russia fear, will also come in handy for that very “great-power confrontation” with both Russia and China in a zone that is, in terms of security matters, sensitive for all three.

FORWARD TO THE PAST

For Russia and much of Eurasia, the second advent of the Taliban suggests that the topic of combating terrorism has found its way back to the top of the agenda. To make matters worse, the advanced weaponry the Americans left in Afghanistan could hypothetically make a future fight with the Taliban more technologically challenging. Unlike Washington, which feels it can now afford to not see counter-terrorism activity as a framing paradigm of its security, Moscow does not have this luxury—Afghanistan is only 3,367 km away from the Russian border.

Certainly, the topic of combating terrorism has never ceased to be relevant for Moscow. But the very victory of the Islamists and the re-creation of the Islamic Emirate is a very dangerous signal to likeminded extremists

around the world. That the Taliban and ISIS-K predate on different theological, philosophical, and political “schools” is known and is of interest only to a handful of academics. For ordinary people, including young people with a “exacerbated Islamist identity,” “it makes no difference what color a cat is as long as it catches mice,” as Deng Xiaoping once put it. In other words, for the majority of Islamists out there, the message that the Taliban victory may be sending is this: what didn’t work out in Iraq and Syria will work in Afghanistan. It is less important in this regard that the Taliban have a different model of state-

building than what ISIS propagates, or that the Taliban use different slogans, or that they are a local movement and not a global one. The bottom line is that they represent a success story that dozens of radical groups around the globe may be tempted to repeat.

Therefore, reasonable concerns for Russian policymakers are that these “sleepers cells” of radicalism may be reawakened once again in certain Russian regions and in parts of Central Asia as well. Hibernating terrorists are

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not just a Eurasian problem, as evidenced by multiple terrorist attacks on the territory of the European Union over the past few years. It is also clear that the long-promoted battle against this phenomenon is not possible without a form of cooperation based on a unity of efforts: a cooperation that does not tolerate the ambiguity of state willpower towards acting in concert, a cooperation that transcends political divisions, and a cooperation that does not cloud common sense in assessing real threats.

In the fight against terrorism, Western counterparts, with rare exceptions, shy away from cooperation with Moscow.

Yet, the prevalent mood in Moscow at the moment is that cooperation in this area with Western countries, though still desirable, seems unlikely after decades of failed attempts to establish a modus for doing so. In the fight against terrorism, Western counterparts, with rare exceptions, shy away from cooperation with Moscow.

Moscow therefore sees the current situation as a window of opportunity to boost its security cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism (and beyond) with major non-Western states that also may be alarmed by the arrival of the Taliban: China, India, and to some extent Iran—not to mention Russia’s Central Asian partners in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

The new situation will require Moscow to exert more resources and focus on its domestic political situation as well as its “near abroad.” Yet, on the external circuit, what we can call the “overheating” of the Russian frontier can be avoided by “managing responsibility” with allied countries whilst concurrently conducting delicate diplomacy with respect to relations with the Taliban. For the moment, the Taliban look cooperative. Yet with more power comes the appetite for ideological expansion and purposeful geopolitical adventures; so this movement will need to be kept in check.

SURVIVAL GUIDE

Less than two months before the United States left Afghanistan (on 9 July 2021, to be precise), Moscow hosted a delegation of the Taliban’s Doha-based “political wing.” The outcome of these negotiations represent the key to understanding Russia’s subsequent actions towards the Taliban, for those talks laid out the basis for Russia’s *modus operandi* with the movement.

The conversation basically revolved around four key areas. *One*, eradicating security threats to Russia and its Central Asian allies that might originate from Afghan territory; *two*, preventing

potential instability spillover to Central Asia; *three*, curbing the drugs trafficking route from Afghanistan through Central Asia to Russia and further onwards to the European Union; and *four*, providing for the safety of Russia's diplomatic mission.

Moscow had few illusions about the nature of the Taliban, which Russia designated as a terrorist organization in the early 2000s when President Vladimir Putin agreed to an American request to open up Russian territory to NATO's wartime logistical efforts in the Afghanistan theatre. Yet now that the Taliban have assumed responsibility and provided guarantees with respect to each of the aforementioned four items, the name of the game has become different on the basis of classical Realpolitik principles.

The Russian leadership conducted itself on the considered premise that that the Taliban's back-channel diplomacy with Beijing and Tehran, together with its the shuttle diplomacy with Moscow and Washington (or, rather, Doha), was meant to establish a calm external environment that would provide the Taliban with enough time, a form of de facto legitimacy, and, ideally, sufficient resources to consolidate its hold on the levers of power in Afghanistan. In other words, the Taliban was believed to have had its own incentives to make credible commitments to the Kremlin with

respect to the Moscow's chief priorities in the area: border security, stability in the "near abroad," and ensuring the safety of its diplomats.

That being said, even if the Taliban do not mean to execute its commitments in full (of if it is incapable of doing so for whatever reason), Russia basically has no other option to deal with the movement. Over the past few years, the Russian military and the country's economy have been overstretched along multiple fronts: from Ukraine and Syria to Libya and Karabakh. While Russia's own posture in its talks with the Taliban is underpinned by modern-day military capabilities that the Soviets simply did not possess in the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet fiasco in Afghanistan is a public memory that serves as deterrent against any significant physical intrusion into Afghanistan.

Therefore, following the snap American departure, Afghanistan emerged for Moscow as yet another unnecessary distraction—and not as a "vacuum to fill," as many in Washington presumed. Still, because stability in Central Asia and the overall security of Russia's southern flank are in effect conjoined to the theme of extremist ideologies—reportedly one of Putin's favorite subjects—the issue is front and center on the Kremlin's radar screen. This combination of the factors, coupled with the Taliban's willingness to negotiate a "non-conflict mode of

co-existence," provided Moscow with the opportunity to establish concrete red lines with the Taliban.

This being the case, the Kremlin pursued what now appears to be a double-track approach. On the one hand, Moscow has been talking to the Taliban via diplomatic channels. On the other, Russia has been conducting joint military drills with Uzbek and Tajik troops while also beefing up the military of its CSTO allies. Interestingly enough, the military exercises have been operating under the slogan of a "joint response to cross-border militant attacks"—which is also a

clear message to the Taliban. The drills have involved tanks, armored personnel carriers, helicopters, SU-25 attack jets, and other advanced weaponry.

Russia cannot be happy with the fact that an Islamic Emirate stands close to its border. Yet, as long as the Taliban observes the aforementioned four-item "agreement" and keep its Islamist agenda local—as bad as it may be for Afghanistan—Russia believes it can tolerate its presence in the neighborhood. Having this new neighbor would imply a more intense life for Russian security services and law enforcement. For instance, the

Defense Ministry will have to do a lot more military coordination with its Central Asia peers; Russia's military intelligence (GRU) will be kept busy monitoring the situation; the Federal Security Services (FSB) will be preoccupied with tracking possibly rising Islamist influences in Central Asia and Russia; and the Federal Drug Control

Service will be put on high alert for potential new heroin production schemes and flows to Russia. But even under these circumstances, diplomatic engagement still appears a better option for Russia than getting involved militarily with no clear political goals or an exit strategy.

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VEGAS RULES

For Russia the present situation in Afghanistan is actually about both Afghanistan and the United States. Mainstream Russian political and expert discourse suggests that Moscow is as concerned about the security of Central Asia as it is critical of the 20-year presence of the U.S.-led coalition in that country.

The bottom-line of that criticism is the ultimate failure of the United States to build both an effective Afghan military able to defend against the Taliban and a "nation" that wouldn't fall apart

under the terrorist offensive. The crumbled Afghan statehood is thus portrayed by Russian policymaking community as a direct consequence of America's strategic blunders. This argument is further projected onto countries like Ukraine and Georgia and other actors, like Russia's own opposition groups which, in the Kremlin's view, rely too much on the American support. Moscow is now embedding the reasoning of "not only will the Americans not help you, but they will likely make things worse" into its persuasion tactics with the leaderships of these countries and these groups to have them change their respective calculus on dealing with Moscow, since only Moscow, not Washington, "means business." In a nutshell, the Afghan story is seen in Moscow as an opportunity to further "de-Americanize" the international system and Russia is intent to make the most of it.

For now, Russia has adopted a wait-and-see approach in Afghanistan. It seeks to engage with key regional stakeholders and is stressing the need for greater regional cooperation within the CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

In Russia's vision, there's minimum, if any, role for the West to play.

"The problem is that in the Mideast the Las Vegas Rules don't apply. What happens in the Mideast doesn't stay in the Mideast." This quote by David Petraeus,

a former CIA director and commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, is not just a wise observation on the essence of the 'politics of the East.' It is also an edification to the political leadership of the United States—both Republicans and Democrats—that events in regions like the Middle East or South Asia often have consequences

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that at once go far beyond narrowly-conceived geographical boundaries as well as transcend political cycles. This quote should also be understood as advice to Washington—as much as to any other capital from Moscow to Beijing—to approach decisionmaking with respect to complex regions in a more balanced and nuanced way. The distinguished general who implemented political decisions made by American politicians in the vastness of Iraq and Afghanistan put a deep meaning into this metaphor, and his political descendants better read more into it than they have so far. ●