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## SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

## The Impact of the Withdrawal from Afghanistan on Russia's Security

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ISAF's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 will directly impact the wider region. Not only is there a risk of instability spilling over to Central Asia, but the drawdown will also accelerate the ongoing shift in the balance of power in Central Asia towards China. Should a spillover occur, the burden will mainly fall on Russia and China. Russia will, however, only continue playing the dominant role in the security of the former Soviet Central Asia (FSCA) until China takes on responsibility for the security of its direct sphere of influence or "dingwei". Russia's Near Abroad, however, overlaps both with the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood in Europe and China's dingwei in Central Asia and the Far East. It is, therefore, necessary to approach Russian reactions to these encroachments on its historical spheres of influence in a single context, taking into account the interrelationship between these three.

### **A WITHDRAWAL WITH A WIDER IMPACT**

In 2014, the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) will draw to an end. ISAF is playing a key role in degrading the Taliban's operational capabilities. Moreover, it is building up the Afghan Security Forces to enable Kabul to assume responsibility of security after ISAF's departure. However, these achievements are fragile and reversible, and can only be consolidated if they are accompanied by additional and lasting reforms.

The drawdown will not only affect Afghanistan but also the wider region and Russia's overall security. This brief begins with addressing the problems arising in Afghanistan as a consequence of the withdrawal. Secondly, it examines two opposing threat assessments of the risk of a spillover of instability from Afghanistan to Central Asia. Thirdly, it attempts to put the consequences of the withdrawal in an Afghan and a regional context. Fourth, it contends that the withdrawal from Afghanistan is accelerating the shift of the balance of power in Central Asia in favour of China. Fifth, it explores the options for Russia to adapt to the changing

geostrategic situation in Central Asia. Sixth, it examines Russia's position in Central Asia in the wider context of its overall security policy. Finally, it concludes that the shift in the balance of power in Central Asia has a direct impact on Russia's geopolitical position, not only in the FSCA, but also in Europe and the Far East.

### **LEAVING AFGHANISTAN**

The situation in Afghanistan is far from stabilised. In the north and the west, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) should be able to control the insurgency after the withdrawal. By contrast, in the south and the east, serious fighting will continue without any prospect of Kabul gaining the upper hand within any reasonable time frame.<sup>1</sup>

The surge of 2010-2012 aimed at pacifying Afghanistan by delivering a debilitating blow to the Taliban and driving them out of key areas. Simultaneously, the ANSF was to be trained and equipped to safeguard stability after the coalition had all but destroyed the Taliban. However, the surge did not accomplish its goals. Moreover, training a large security force from scratch in a short time has yet to yield results. The ANSF will have to carry out major operations instead of mopping up the remnants of the insurgency. It is unlikely that they will be able to defeat the Taliban. War will probably continue as long as donors fund the ANSF. This will lead to a stalemate until patience and interest of the US and its partners with Afghanistan runs out.<sup>2</sup> Instability in Afghanistan will continue as long as no political solution is reached.

This will be all the more difficult as the position of the future president is uncertain. Vote rigging, intimidation, bribing, and a lack of transparency characterised the 2009 elections. President Karzai has no natural successor. Most candidates for next year's elections are controversial and participated in the civil war before 1996. This does not bode

well for the legitimacy and future of his successor.

Any peace settlement will also have to take into account the interests of all parties, the Taliban included. Pakistan lays claim to an important degree of influence over the central government. Other countries, like Iran and bordering states of the FSCA, want to control parts of the country to support their ethnic kin. Still others will want economic concessions.<sup>3</sup> The question is in how far all parties want genuinely to engage in a peace process.

### **THE AFGHAN NATIONAL DIMENSION**

Afghanistan's security will remain dependent on the presence of ISAF follow-on forces post-2014. In January 2013, the commander of ISAF, General Alan, identified three options for a residual presence of US troops in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> A first option of about 6,000 troops would focus on counter-terrorism missions; a second option of about 10,000 soldiers would also include training, mentoring, and logistical support; in a third option of 20,000 troops, US troops would also be able to patrol some areas. The American Administration floated a zero-option in July, due to rising tensions with President Karzai. American policy makers and military authorities quickly labelled this not a realistic option.<sup>5</sup> However, it could be reconsidered if no agreement on a security pact is reached by the end of 2013.

The most likely scenario is a small force of about 10,000, reinforced by smaller contributions of allies. This would allow for protecting American bases for special operations, some limited support to the ANSF, as well as some training and mentoring. In any event, once the US-led coalition draws down, a power vacuum will result, which will somehow have to be filled. Some regional powers will most likely step in to assert their influence in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

Russia has little influence over the internal political process of Afghanistan and is a modest aid and development donor. It has been frequently involved in Afghanistan, most prominently during the Soviet intervention in the eighties. The "*Afghan syndrome*" caused by this fiasco still influences Russia's perceptions of Afghanistan. In any event, Russia does have every interest in a political solution as a prerequisite to tackle the drug problem and instability.

### **THE REGIONAL DIMENSION**

The players affected by the withdrawal can be represented as a set of concentric circles, taking into account the level of interests and leverage each actor has.<sup>7</sup>

#### *The neighbours*

Pakistan and Iran constitute a first tier. Pakistan wields excessive influence in Afghanistan, exerting leverage on Jihadist groups inside and outside Afghanistan as well as on politicians, local authorities, and business people. Iran's influence is chiefly present north of the Hindu Kush. However, Pashtuns and the more secular Uzbeks are weary of Iran's influence.<sup>8</sup>

Taking into account the influence both countries wield within Afghanistan, any comprehensive peace agreement will have to accommodate key legitimate concerns of both Pakistan and Iran as the most relevant regional stakeholders.

#### *The regional powers*

A second circle consists of China, India, the states of the FSCA, and Russia. China and India are the most influential players.

China still keeps a relatively low political profile but is a main economic player and investor. For the present, it is mainly interested in Afghanistan as part of its resource base. China is investing heavily in resource extraction such as copper and oil. In the longer

term, China sees Afghanistan as a pawn in its rivalry with India, completing a series of alliances with Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. In the meantime, China keeps its options open, even supporting the Taliban to a certain extent, hoping to expedite US disengagement from Afghanistan and Central Asia.<sup>9</sup>

India looks upon Afghanistan in the context of its rivalry with Pakistan, and to a lesser degree with China, but it also recognises substantial economic potential. It wants to avoid the return of a Pakistan-aligned government in Kabul, which uses Afghan soil to prepare terrorist attacks on India. India has traditionally had excellent relations with the Afghan government, except with the Taliban. Delhi has given Afghanistan \$2 billion in aid during the last decade, making it the fourth largest donor. Contrary to Pakistan, India has engaged the Afghan military and trains Afghan officers.

Russia, has been the most influential player in Central Asia for more than a century and a half, but recognises that the region has become multipolar. After 2001, Russia deliberately chose to adopt a low profile in Afghanistan, not cultivating local actors until 2006. From 2006 to 2009, Russia supported northern groups, hoping they would bring pressure to bear on Karzai to adopt a policy more independent from the Americans. Russia retreated when this approach misfired and became redundant as Karzai and the Americans had more and more fallouts. Its proposals for cooperation in security matters and involvement in rebuilding old Soviet infrastructure were rejected. Most disappointing for the Russians, however, is the failure to have the Afghans and ISAF implement a more vigorous anti-narcotic programme.<sup>10</sup>

The main way Afghanistan relates to the FSCA is through their concern for a spillover of instability post-2014. Also, the countries of

Central Asia, once mainly transit avenues for Afghan drugs, have become major consumers.

### *The outside powers*

Stakeholders that are not part of the region make up the third category.

America maintains a full geopolitical agenda in Central Asia. The US has always been at the forefront of unlocking Central Asian hydrocarbons, circumventing Russia. Most importantly, the US will want to play a role in the rebalancing of power in Central Asia. Concerning Afghanistan, it hopes to retain a reduced military presence. Both American and Afghan demands held up the arduous negotiations of a security agreement on the scope of the US military mission in Afghanistan post-2014. On 24 November a Loya Jirga endorsed a deal. However, Karzai decided to postpone the signing of the agreement until after next year's elections. Karzai seems to have entered a game of brinkmanship based on the conviction that the US needs this agreement at all cost. The US is threatening to pull out completely after 2014 if the agreement is not signed by the end of 2013.

The EU will remain present in Afghanistan and the FSCA post-2014. EU countries may stay militarily involved post-ISAF if the US does so. Also, the EU and Afghanistan are finalising a *Cooperation Agreement for Partnership and Development (CAPD)*. EU countries donate more than one billion USD yearly. It is also training the Afghan National Police and supports rural development, agriculture, health care, governance, border control, and counter-narcotic activities.<sup>11</sup> The EU is also extending its relations with the FSCA. The EU *Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia* includes reinforcement of political dialogue, human rights, education, rule of law, energy, transport, water, border management, and trade and economic relations.<sup>12</sup>

Turkey's presence in Afghanistan transcends its

role as a NATO ally. Its primary goal is to strengthen relations with Turkic ethnic groups in the region. However, Turkey also has close historical, religious and cultural links with Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> Turkey and Afghanistan signed a memorandum of understanding in 2011 on "*Cooperation on Energy and Mineral Resources*", a first of its kind. Turkey also holds diplomatic cards complementing traditional Western influence in the region. Since 2007, Turkey takes part in an annual trilateral summit with Afghanistan and Pakistan. Turkey is, as only NATO ally, a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). In January 2010, Turkey hosted the *Istanbul Summit for Friendship and Cooperation in the Heart of Asia* to find sustainable solutions for security and stability in Afghanistan.

Arab countries also have interests in Afghanistan through their religious links and their diplomatic efforts to come to a political solution.

### *The multinational framework*

Finally, multilateral regional frameworks constitute a fourth layer. These have some influence, but national interests and direct deals often take precedence.<sup>14</sup> Regarding Russia, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the SCO are of particular importance. Furthermore, Russia maintains bilateral relations with each of the states of the FSCA and is part of institutionalised frameworks such as the Dushanbe Quartet (Russia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan). Finally, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime is of particular interest to Russia because of its involvement in counter-narcotic issues.

The CSTO, as a Russia-led collective defence organisation, is the most obvious instrument for coordinating Russia's security response to an eventual spillover with allies from the FSCA. However, so far the CSTO can only operate on the territory of its member states.<sup>15</sup>

As Turkmenistan is not a member, and Uzbekistan suspended its membership in 2012, the SCO can only effectively confront the threat in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. However, it does legally bind Russia to the security of its Central Asian allies.

Likewise, member states of the SCO worry about future developments in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> Of Afghanistan's neighbours, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and China are members of the SCO. Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are observers and Turkmenistan attends as guest. Since 2003, military exercises take place under the auspices of the SCO, comprising chiefly of troops from China and Russia. The SCO also established a permanent *Regional Antiterrorist Structure* to increase cooperation to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism.

## **SPILLOVER AND SHIFTING BALANCE OF POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA**

### *Spillover?*

The withdrawal is causing considerable concerns about security in the broader region. On one hand, there are real or perceived threats of spillover of terrorism, Islamic extremism, separatism, and narcotic-related crime into Central Asia. On the other hand, the disengagement of the US from Afghanistan and Central Asia is accelerating the rise of China in the FSCA at the expense of Russia.

If these risks of spillover will develop into actual threats, remains to be seen. There is no general agreement about the scale of the threat to the stability of an already volatile Central Asia. Two opposite narratives exist about the impact of a withdrawal.<sup>17</sup> The Afghan and Western governments claim that Afghanistan will be capable of guaranteeing its own security, provided the West does continue to support Kabul. According to this view, there is no significant risk of spillover to the region. Conversely, the states of the FSCA and Russia, and regional international organisations such as

the CSTO and, to a lesser degree, the SCO, predict a serious spillover into neighbouring countries and beyond.<sup>18</sup>

Should these risks materialise, the first victims would be the states of the FSCA, but the burden of countering them would fall primarily on Russia and China.

China's main concerns are insurrection spreading to Uighur separatists and instability in the FSCA, substantially raising the cost of integrating the region in its resource base.

Russia's main concerns are instability in the FSCA spreading to the Russian Federation and drug trafficking. Russia's initial acceptance of the US and NATO's involvement in Afghanistan rested on the expectation that the West would defeat the Taliban, withdraw from the region rapidly, and owe a debt for Moscow's help in getting access to supply routes through the FSCA.<sup>19</sup> None of these hopes materialised. Moreover, whereas the US and ISAF tied down and wore down the Taliban and its supporters for more than a decade in Afghanistan, after 2014, Afghanistan could become a source of spreading terrorism, separatism, and Islam fundamentalism.

The threat perceptions between the various states of the FSCA differ significantly. Insurgents of the *Islamic Movement of Turkestan* (IMT) are infiltrating Tajikistan and appear to have reached Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan does not seem affected yet, but most members of the IMT are Uzbek. Turkmenistan has managed to stay neutral and even maintained close relations with the Taliban emirate. It hopes to remain on close terms with whomever ultimately gets into power in Kabul. Even Kazakhstan, hitherto the most stable country in the region, has seen a surge in Islamic extremism and terrorism since 2011. Finally, the looming transition of leadership in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan could make the region even more volatile and open

to extremism.

The withdrawal will render the fight against narcotics originating from Afghanistan even more difficult.<sup>20</sup> Afghanistan not only produces over 90 percent of the world's opiates, it also is the main producer of cannabis. Afghan opiates kill 100,000 people a year globally. Narcotics are a serious threat to the FSCA, already turning Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan into narco-states. In Russia, an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 people die of drug overdoses annually. If Afghanistan also turns into a narco-state, this would exacerbate the drug problem in Russia as well as in the FSCA.

### *The FSCA: from Russia's near abroad to China's direct sphere of influence*

The drawdown of the Western intervention in Afghanistan and its effects on the region cannot be seen in isolation from the ongoing shift of the balance of power in Central Asia. The FSCA remained up to recently firmly in the grip of Russia. After the US making inroads in the region, chiefly for security reasons, China is now penetrating Central Asia in a more permanent fashion. For the time being, China is focussing on extracting resources, marketing its commodities, and building infrastructure linking its Eastern provinces to the region.

Until recently, Russia dominated the energy infrastructure and markets unlocking the region's energy resources. It rather successfully fended off the West's attempts to achieve energy independence through circumventing Russia's pipeline grid. Now, however, China is rapidly breaking Russia's stranglehold over Central Asian energy exports. In a remarkably short period, China has managed to build a pipeline system, which is independent of Russia.

Moreover, Chinese interests in the FSCA also extend to uranium, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, hydroelectricity, transport infrastructure, and telecommunications. China's trade with the region has grown to \$46 billion in 2012,

compared to \$88 billion with Russia. During President Xi Jinping visit in September 2013 to the FSCA, China pledged nearly \$100 billion in energy contracts. \$50 billion will go to Turkmenistan, \$30 billion to Kazakhstan, \$15 billion to Uzbekistan, and \$1.5 to 3 billion to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>21</sup>

China's push into the region is not purely economic. It is an integrated geopolitical approach, combining "*zhoubian zhengce*" (periphery policy), "*mulin zhengce*" (good neighbouring policy), and "*wending zhoubian*" (stabilising the periphery). China considers the FSCA as part of its direct sphere of influence or "*dingwei*". Security is part of this integrated approach even though, for the time being, China concentrates on economic penetration while freeloading with regard to security on the US in the Persian Gulf and Russia in the FSCA.<sup>22</sup> China's growing clout in Central Asia is also changing the wider geopolitical equation. China's imports and exports at present move over sea routes controlled by the American Navy. Land routes to Central Asia and to the Russian Far East will give it access to raw materials and export markets free from American interference.

This confronts Russia with a triple challenge. Russia identifies three "*directions of risk*"; NATO in the West, Islam extremism in the South, and demographic emptiness in the Russian Far East.<sup>23</sup> These are the regions where Russia's near abroad overlaps with the EU's *Eastern Neighbourhood* and China's *dingwei*.

### **OPTIONS FOR RUSSIA**

It would be naïve to assume that China only has economic and no geopolitical ambitions. This pushes Russia to review its ambitions in Central Asia. The past 25 years, Russia has fluctuated between retreat and new imperial ambition, while, at the same time, initiating multilateral cooperation.

On one hand, the agreement in December

1990 between the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus to dissolve the Soviet Union without consulting their Central Asian colleagues, signalled a radical retreat from the region, which the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States could not gloss over. A further indication of disengagement was the decision in 2004 to remove the Russian border guards from the Tajik-Afghan border. Russia's refusal in 2010 to intervene in the riots in Kyrgyzstan, once again demonstrated its reluctance to get involved on the ground.

On the other hand, other actions demonstrate Russia's continuing interest in Central Asia.<sup>24</sup> Until recently, Russia controlled all the pipelines unlocking the hydrocarbon resources of the region. In 2001, it initially showed considerable reluctance to support the deployment of American assets to Afghanistan by way of the FSCA. It retains military bases in Tajikistan and is expanding its military presence in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>25</sup> Russia has moulded the CSTO into an instrument to coordinate security forces in the FSCA under its control. Moscow is also trying to retain Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in its political and economic orbit through the Eurasian Union and the Eurasian Economic Union. These organisations are not only aimed at diminishing Western influence, but are also anti-Chinese projects, trying to forestall China's rise in the region.

Until recently Russia's policy was to maximise its influence in the entire region through pushing for economic and security integration under its leadership. Currently, however, Russia seems to be focussing on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Kazakhstan remains Russia's privileged partner, mainly because of its location, large ethnic Russian minority, and an economy largely oriented towards Russia.<sup>26</sup> Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are still deeply dependent on Russia. Turkmenistan, by contrast, is growing ever closer to China. Over the last fifteen years, Uzbekistan has been changing tack regularly,

once leaning toward Russia, and then aligning itself with the US. Moreover, Russia is demonstrating a new willingness to get involved in Afghan affairs after 2014.<sup>27</sup>

### **THE ROLE OF CENTRAL ASIA IN RUSSIA'S OVERALL SECURITY POLICY**

Russia's position in Central Asia cannot be seen in isolation from the interrelationship between the three strategic directions of its security posture.

Focusing on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan does not guarantee long-term influence in the region. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are rapidly being pulled into China's economic orbit. The northern, ethnically Russian part of Kazakhstan, seems to be the only part of the FSCA where Russia has a perspective of retaining a dominant influence in the longer term.

China is not only making significant inroads in the FSCA; it is also steadily encroaching upon the Russian Far East, and even Eastern Siberia.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, this will lead to tensions with China. While Russian and Chinese interests coincide for the time being, it is China that poses the greatest threat to Russia's territorial integrity and influence in its southern and eastern strategic directions. In a contest with China, Russia is in a fragile position, chiefly because of the demographic emptiness of its territory, "*almost beckoning Chinese colonisation*".<sup>29</sup> Russia, therefore, has to try and expand its demographic base. This confronts Russia with an existential problem.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union not only shed off those parts considered a liability, but also split up the three Slavic components of the Empire, leaving a quarter of the Slavic population outside of Russia. Without Ukraine and Belarus, Russia does not possess the indispensable demographic base to compete with the US, the EU, China, and other

upcoming powers. Without Ukraine and Belarus, Russia's is but a medium power on the eastern fringe of Europe. As the former American Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote in the mid-nineties, "*without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine, suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.*"<sup>30</sup> Hence, the unacceptability for Russia of these countries drifting toward the West and the urgency of consolidating a union of some sort before tensions with China turn acute.

This is equally true for the Russian Far East and Central Asia: if Russia loses its Far East with its access to the Pacific, control of the Northern Sea Route, and vast resources, or loses foothold in Central Asia, it will not be able to claim to be a Eurasian power anymore. With rising tensions with China on the horizon, Russia has to secure its position in Europe and its presence in Central Asia. For the time being, this leads Russia into a confrontational approach towards the West while avoiding altercations with China.

## CONCLUSION

In the short term, Russia will remain the leading security provider in the FSCA after ISAF's withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, in the longer term, it will have to give way to China in most of Central Asia once this country takes on its responsibilities for the security of its periphery and resource base.

It is essential to keep in mind that Russia's three strategic directions are interdependent. In order to regain the status of a major power, Russia has to augment its demographic base. To achieve this Ukraine and Belarus have to return in the fold of some kind of formal Russian dominated union. Likewise, without keeping a foothold in Central Asia and securing its Far East, Russia will remain a medium sized power. These prerequisites to regain major power status harbour the germ of future conflict in Russia's three strategic directions.

Finally, a combination of China's population and the resources of Siberia and Central Asia will be unacceptable, not only for Russia, but also for other major powers. Therefore, how Russia stands up to these challenges in the coming decade, and how the West acts, will determine the new balance of power.

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- <sup>18</sup> This was made clear during a roundtable on Afghanistan organised by the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Brussels in September 2013 between members of Russian and Brussels-based think tanks; within both groups some were quite pessimistic and others more optimistic about the danger of a spillover from Afghanistan to Central Asia after 2014.
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<sup>25</sup> In September 2013, Russia extended the Kant airbase deal with Kyrgyzstan until 2032. In October 2013, the Tajik Parliament ratified an agreement to extend the presence of Russian troops in the country until 2042.

<sup>26</sup> According to the 2009 census, ethnic Russians make up about 24% of the population of Kazakhstan.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Cooley and Marlene Laruelle, “The Changing Logic of Russian Strategy in Central Asia: From Privileged Sphere to Divide and Rule?”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* no. 261, Policy Memo (July 9, 2013), <http://ponarseurasia.org/article/new-policy-memo-changing-logic-russian-strategy-central-asia-privileged-sphere-divide-and>.

<sup>28</sup> According to the 2010 census, the three nearest Chinese administrative divisions to the Russian Far East and Eastern Siberia have a combined population of about 80 million. In the administrative divisions in second line, there are 148 million. According to the 2010 census, the Russian Far East and Eastern Siberia have a population of 6.3 million and 19.2 million respectively. The population of the Russian Far East in 2015 is estimated at 4.7 million. The total number of Chinese guest workers in the Russian Far East is conservatively estimated at half a million.

<sup>29</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard, American Primacy and Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p.95.

<sup>30</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Premature Partnership,” *Foreign Affairs* no. 73 March/April 1994 (March 1994): pp. 67–82.



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