



Russia-India cooperation on Post-American Afghanistan

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Abstract: Russian foreign policy has long championed multipolarity in international relations. As relations between Russia and the West have deteriorated, Russia has sought to establish a Eurasian project involving non-Western great powers. India has been identified by Russia as one of the major pillars of this global realignment. However, India's global reach and power have been undermined by its entanglement in regional disputes and volatile relations with some of its partners. While some minor differences exist on the regional level in Eurasia between Russia and India, a major disagreement has been the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which Russia views as a global organization, and India sees it as regional. Our analysis suggests that the US military presence in Afghanistan, along with its plans for geoeconomic and geopolitical dominance in Eurasia, has been a major distracting factor in Russia-India relations. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the decline of its influence may provide new opportunities for regional cooperation between Russia and India. Our research indicates that Afghanistan may be one such country where the interests of Russia and India can converge. Both countries are interested in a stable and secure Afghanistan, and both may be willing to accept Taliban rule, subject to certain conditions, if it helps achieve that goal. In Central Asia, Russia and India have previously pursued divergent agendas, with Russia being somewhat protective of its natural sphere of interests. However, we conclude that with the elimination of external disturbances in the form of US military occupation of Afghanistan, the interests of both countries could be reconciled in relation to Central Asia. By working in synergy, Russia and India could collaborate more effectively in this region.

Keywords: Russia, India, Russian-Indian relations, Eurasia, Afghanistan

The policies of Russia and India towards Central Asia and Afghanistan have been extensively studied by experts from both countries (Kaushiki 2013; Kothari 2014; Stobdan 2015; Safranchuk 2018; Stepanova 2019; Stepanova 2021). While Central Asian and Afghan issues are usually analyzed together, it is important to

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differentiate the approaches of Russian and Indian authors. Russian scholars consider Central Asia as part of a zone where Russia promotes economic and security initiatives, and builds international institutions. They take into account Afghanistan mainly from a security perspective, often as a negative factor for Russian policies in Central Asia. In contrast, Indian authors view Central Asia as an area of emerging economic opportunity, where soft power can also be used to increase political influence. Afghanistan is an integral part of India's policy towards Central Asia, serving as a bridge to the region.

Therefore, underlying vectors of Russian and Indian attitudes to Central Asia seem to collide. India seeks to facilitate and exploit the opening of former Soviet spaces, which many in Russia associate with a decrease in regional connections to Russia and, consequently, a decline in Russian influence. Russia aims to bind Central Asia with various economic and security ties, making its connections to Russia overwhelmingly more intensive and important than connections to other countries. The mismatch between the vectors underlying Russian and Indian policies toward Central Asia can be explained and analyzed with reference to their respective economic and security interests, which can then be placed into an analytical framework of conflicting or reconciling interests regarding Central Asia.

However, this article suggests a different approach. It employs traditional descriptive analysis to demonstrate that an important element of Russian policy toward Central Asia and Afghanistan was a reaction to US and Western regional policies, which were perceived as hostile to Russian interests. India, on the other hand, was eager to take advantage of opportunities arising from the US intervention in Afghanistan. According to this explanatory model, the US geopolitical and geoeconomic activism in Eurasia, of which the military presence in Afghanistan was central, diverted regional calculus and exacerbated regional divergences instead of helping to reconcile them. Consequently, after the collapse of the US project for Afghanistan, regional views on Afghanistan may converge to a greater extent.

Russia's vision for Eurasia and the role of Afghanistan

In the late twentieth century, Eurasia became preoccupied with globalization. Countries situated on the seashore edges of the Eurasian continent took advantage of their seashore positions to participate in globalization and associated themselves with other political and economic regions, rather than with Eurasia. Meanwhile, in the core of Eurasia, newly independent states (NIS), some of which had been under Moscow's influence for centuries, were discontented with their socialist experience and sought cooperation with leading world powers, whom they regarded as a source of prosperity (Safranchuk 2019: 5-6). Additionally, after more than seventy years of Soviet integration, the NIS became hostile to many interdependencies between them, some of which were imposed rather than naturally evolved, and wanted to tackle them in the spirit of emerging national identities. The wish either to get rid of interdependencies or to

shift them in one's favor, which can be defined as egoism toward neighbors, contributed to tensions between neighboring countries and further increased NIS's interest in globalization as a source of development. In the 1990s, openness to the outside world went hand in hand with more division inside the core of Eurasia, and interestingly enough, the latter reinforced the former. This proclivity for engagement with leading world powers fitted well into the growing trend of globalization, together with regional egoism shaping a strong outward political vector (from Eurasia to the world centers of development) at the core of Eurasia.

In the 2000s, a new important element emerged in Eurasia in addition to the outward vector. With the increase in commodity prices, international interest in Eurasian countries grew substantially. Some countries expressed interest in the region's natural resources, while others sought to take advantage of its transit capabilities, and some were drawn by both factors. Germany (and the entire EU), China, Japan, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, India, and Middle Eastern monarchies (although their interest had more to do with the Islamic component), were among the states that paid greater attention to the landmass of Eurasia. The interest in the core of Eurasia by countries that had already succeeded in globalizing formed a sort of inward policy vector in the region. As a result, not only the post-Soviet countries looked outward from Eurasia, but also many others looked inward to the continent. At that time, the inward and outward vectors were viewed as complementary within the prevailing trend for globalization, and there was a growing interest in enhancing connectivity within the Eurasian continent from both ends, from the depths of Eurasia and from its seashore parts.

However, a vision for regional integration also existed at the core of Eurasia. While Russian and Kazakh policies were following the outward vector in the 1990s, they also preserved some interest in integration initiatives in the post-Soviet space. In the 1990s, although a number of agreements were signed, their initiatives did not outweigh the momentum for egoism. However, statistics for 1999-2002 revealed that economic growth in Russia and Kazakhstan, driven by the increase of world oil prices, led to more active trade within the entire post-Soviet space, and in particular between Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus. This suggested that common economic growth for these four states could be quicker and more sustainable than individual growth for each of them. Besides, the idea emerged that integration may help these countries to preserve their industrial capabilities under tough competition, which would stem from accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO)¹. That thinking was fully in line with the new regionalism approach. While scholars debate many aspects of it (Wheeler 2002; Söderbaum 2003: 5; Hettne 2005; Warleigh-Lack 2006;), there is

¹ Grinberg R.S. 2005. *Edinoe jekonomicheskoe prostranstvo kak sredstvo diversifikacii nashih jekonomik* [Common Economic Space as an instrument for diversification of our economies]. *Proceedings of the first forum 'Edinoe jekonomicheskoe prostranstvo Belarusi, Kazahstana, Rossii i Ukrainy: znachenie, vozmozhnosti, perspektivy'* [Common Economic Space for Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine: Options and Perspectives]. Moscow. P. 73–74.

a strong consensus that the new regionalism is "extroverted rather than introverted" (Söderbaum 2003: 5). This means that, contrary to old regionalism, which emphasized protectionism and encouraged trade within economic blocks while discouraging it with outside countries, the new regionalism is more open, exposing regional industries to global competition and thus fully consistent with globalization. Soon Russian and Kazakh approach to integration further evolved. In 2007-2008, the West, viewed as the driver of global development, suddenly became the source of global financial crisis. The crisis appeared to undermine globalization (Vardomsky, Pylin 2014: 10) and trigger strategic rebalancing. Traditional leaders were in relative decline while new contenders were on the rise. The most ambitious leaders of the post-Soviet space, namely Putin and Nazarbaev, wanted to be part of this strategic shift. In October 2011, Putin and Nazarbaev presented a vision of a new regional union. "This union will allow us not merely to fit into the global economy and trade, but truly participate in decision-making on global rules and frameworks for the future," Putin wrote². Nazarbaev added that the new union had "every chance to become an integral part of the new world architecture"³. Post-Soviet integration – an attempt to build a coalition merely to fit better into globalization supervised by others – evolved into Eurasian integration, which aimed to create a strong regional center of development to be one of the stakeholders in the new world order. While Putin and Nazarbaev stressed the open character of their Eurasian Union vision, some aspects of their thinking suggested adjustments to the mainstream new regionalism. Putin claimed that, in the post-crisis reality, solutions for global problems should come from "the bottom": solutions should first be tried "inside established regional structures – the EU, NAFTA, APEC, ASEAN and others, and only then (taken on global level) through a dialogue between such structures."⁴ Later, Russian scholars developed this idea into the notion of "integration of integrations," which constitutes globalization. In this interpretation, globalization and regional integration are not opposed to each other.

These broad geostrategic considerations underpinned many political collisions in the post-Soviet space between Russia and the West, particularly through the 2000s and the beginning of 2010s. Yet, neither of the parties has been completely successful in achieving their objectives. Integration projects promoted by Russia and Kazakhstan encountered obstacles, with a customs union only being established in 2010. It was later extended to form a common economic space, and in 2015, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was established. With all the delays and compromises, only five coun-

² Putin V. 2011. Novyi integratsionnyi proekt dlya Evrazii – budushchee, kotoroe rozhdaetsya segodnya [New project of integration for Eurasia – the future that is born today]. *Izvestiya Newspaper*. URL: <http://izvestia.ru/news/502761> (accessed 28.12.2022).

³ Nazarbaev N. 2011. Evraziiskii Soyuz: ot idei k istorii budushchego [Eurasian Union: from idea to the story of the future]. *Izvestiya Newspaper*. URL: <http://izvestia.ru/news/504908>. (accessed 28.12.2022).

⁴ Putin V. 2011. Novyi integratsionnyi proekt dlya Evrazii – budushchee, kotoroe rozhdaetsya segodnya [New project of integration for Eurasia – the future that is born today]. *Izvestiya Newspaper*. URL: <http://izvestia.ru/news/502761> (accessed 28.12.2022).

tries became full members (Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia), with Uzbekistan joining as an observer in 2020. Important regional economies, such as Ukraine and Azerbaijan, have no intention of joining the EAEU.

However, the Western efforts did not succeed either. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the EU and the US envisioned the Central Asia – Caucasus axis around the Caspian Sea with further connection to Europe either through Turkey and the Mediterranean, or through the Black Sea and Ukraine. Although several pipelines connected the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea with the Black Sea, a robust transport corridor through the Central Asia – Caucasus axis did not emerge. Trans-Caspian infrastructure did not materialize at all, remaining hostage to many diplomatic, political, technical, and economic complexities. Even the Caucasus – Europe part of the axis remained underdeveloped, and the conflict of 2008 exposed the Caucasus to higher geopolitical risks. In the following years, Turkey became increasingly at odds with Europe, and competition over Ukraine intensified. All geographical elements necessary to connect Central Asia to Europe via the South Caucasus were under severe geopolitical pressure. Meanwhile, after the US invasion of Afghanistan, American experts developed a vision to integrate Central and South Asia⁵. In late 2005, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared it to be the US policy under the name "Greater Central Asia" (GCA), and the 2006 National Security Strategy praised the concept. In 2011, the Obama administration introduced the "The New Silk Road" (NSR) vision, which was very close to the GCA. However, it remained underfunded in the following years and was mainly narrowed to the Northern Distribution Network, designed to help supply increased US military presence in Afghanistan with less dependence on Pakistan's transit route. As the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, prospects for the GCA or NSR declined.

In the end, Russia and Kazakhstan were unable to fully consolidate the Eurasian core into a solid economic bloc, while the US failed to provide states in the region with access to global markets independent from Russia. When China launched its Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) initiative in September 2013 (later rebranded into One Belt – One Road, OBOR), the US initially viewed it as a reinforcement of globalization in Eurasia. Indeed, China had previously been cautious about the formation of the Customs Union, as well as about the Eurasian Union vision, when it was first presented by Putin and Nazarbaev in 2011. China did not want new trade and investment barriers in Eurasia (Western Asia in Chinese terms). Moreover, the Chinese interest in the core Eurasia had grown from merely having access to local markets and raw materials to something more ambitious, as the SREB intended to build land routes to the Middle East and Europe. Seemingly, this was enough for the Chinese project to qualify as globalist, and allayed not only Central Asian concerns about the Chinese expansion, but even American ones. The Obama administration's "Enduring Vision for Central Asia,"

⁵ Starr F. A. 2005. 'Greater Central Asia Partnership' for Afghanistan and Its Neighbours, The Central Asia. *Silk Road Paper*. URL: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/30296/05_Greater_Central_Asia_Partnership.pdf. (accessed 28.12.2022).

released in early 2015, defined the Chinese SREB and the US NSR as complementary, and Washington offered Beijing to discuss how to coordinate the two projects⁶. However, China instead engaged in talks with Russia to coordinate the SREB and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

In all these dynamics of the 2000s and early 2010s, Afghanistan was viewed as an element of Western geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies. In the framework of the system dominant among the Western politicians and experts, it was necessary to provide the countries in the depths of Eurasia with access to major maritime trade routes. Although this was sometimes explicitly linked to the geopolitical interests of the United States⁷, it was more frequently articulated in terms of historical and economic considerations. It was common to state that transport projects should revive the Great Silk Road, which once connected China, Turkey, India, the Middle East and South Asia through Central Asia. The disruption of these close ties was attributed to the policy of the Russian Empire, which purportedly severed the connections between local nations and the wider world by extending its power deep into Eurasia, and the USSR, which allegedly isolated these regions even further⁸. The disruption of trade and economic ties in Eurasia was often linked to the partition of spheres of influence between the Russian and British Empires, as well as the transformation of Afghanistan into a buffer state (Rubin 2020: 14). These claims are not entirely historically correct, and experts acknowledge that the closing off of Central Asian spaces (although not their complete isolation from the outside world) occurred much earlier, in the 17th century. Despite that fact, these distorted views formed the foundation of a large-scale geo-economic program designed to strengthen economic relations in Eurasia while circumventing Russia. Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the establishment of a pro-American regime there, the country became a central link in the implementation of these plans.

Meanwhile, Russia experienced an increased economic isolation after the continuing exchange of sanctions and countersanction with the West since 2014. Despite some voices within Russia supporting further protectionist measures and a move towards some sort of "closed regionalization Russia", the decision-makers quickly rejected this option. While Russia may have initially wanted to become more protectionist, the risk of being further isolated by other countries made preventing such isolation a political priority. Consequently, Russia focused on creating a more global framework above the

⁶ Hoagland Richard E. Central Asia: What's Next? 2015. *Georgetown University, Washington, DC*. March 30 // <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2015/240014.htm>

⁷ Jaffe A.M. 1988. Unlocking the Assets: Energy and the Future of Central Asia and the Caucasus: Main Study. *The James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University*. URL: http://large.stanford.edu/publications/coal/references/baker/studies/assets/docs/UnlockingtheAssets_MainStudy.pdf (access 28.12.2022).

⁸ Byrd W. 2002. Economic Activity and Financing in the Regional Context Exploiting the New Opportunities. *Paper Presented at the Tripartite Ministerial Meeting of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan on Cooperation for Development*. Tehran. Iran. 18-19 May. P. 1-2.

EAEU, developing the concept of Greater Eurasia, signing various "EAEU plus" agreements with countries such as Vietnam and Iran, and introducing the vision of Greater Eurasian Partnership.

This pivot towards Asia did not change Russia's desire to see Eurasia become a center of economic and political power (Karaganov 2017: 6), and its "EAEU plus" approach is complementary to the interests of regional powers located on the seashores of Eurasia. These regional powers prioritize securing their own access to assets within Eurasia rather than promoting access beyond Eurasia for landlocked countries. In the past, the United States' globalist approach with its inherent openness seemed to offer the possibility of achieving such access, but now Russia's adjusted regionalization vision is supportive of greater connectivity within Eurasia. The Greater Eurasia vision, accommodates both the Chinese interest to develop trans-Eurasian transport infrastructure, and the EU's, Iranian, Indian, Japanese, and others' desire to have access to the core of Eurasia. In 2022, in the context of the Ukrainian crisis, the West imposed a large wave of sanctions on Russia, which can be seen as an attempt to disconnect Russia from global and regional economic activity. However, Russia opposes such isolation and is investing time and effort into creating economic connections with non-Western countries.

Russia's policy towards Afghanistan: from expectations to reality

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Russia supported the US military intervention in Afghanistan and utilized its influence in Central Asia to aid the operation. Russia hoped that this move would not only lead to a general improvement in Russia-US relations but also result in significant practical advantages.

During the 1990s, Afghanistan was implicated in various events in the post-Soviet space. For instance, the office of Taliban spiritual leader Mullah Omar had a map depicting the borders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan extending into the former Soviet space and even into Russian territory. Afghan's connections of Central Asian extremist underground were apparent in many cases, the most obvious one being the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992-1997, where Afghanistan supported the anti-secular forces. This conflict involved Russia, as the Tajik-Afghan border was guarded by the Russian border guards. Afghanistan was also linked to the first and second Chechen wars, in which Russia confronted not only separatists but also Islamist extremists⁹. The Taliban government in Afghanistan was the first entity with which the de-facto independent Ichkeria (after the Khasavyurt accords of 1997) established diplomatic ties. At the turn of the century, Russian officials used to identify a strategic Islamic-extremist trian-

⁹ For instance, Khattab, a field commander of Arab origin, who became widely known during the Chechen campaigns, fought against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan, then received patronage from the Taliban and al-Qaeda, ran a training camp for fighters on territories under their control, and smuggled fighters into Chechnya to fight the Russian army.

gle Afghanistan–North Caucasus–Kosovo. The severity of this threat was such that in 2000, Sergey Yastrzhembsky, an advisor to Russian President Vladimir Putin, publicly stated that Russia might have to attack the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan¹⁰. However, this did not come to pass.

Russia's initial support for the U.S. intervention was based on the calculation that American goals in Afghanistan would be exclusively counterterrorist and not geopolitical. Moreover, Russia expected the U.S. to achieve the main counterterrorism objectives in about two years, and withdraw from Afghanistan afterwards.

However, events unfolded differently than expected. The American military presence in Afghanistan extended beyond the anticipated timeline, and the situation in the country continued to deteriorate after the resurgence of the Taliban in 2004. Arguably, Russia was ready to accept that the Americans were unsuccessful and needed more time. After all, Russia knew the difficulty of implementing any strategy in Afghanistan. But there emerged voices in the U.S. in favour of a long-term military presence in Afghanistan, with geopolitical rather than counterterrorist aims. The U.S. sought to consolidate its military bases in Central Asia and to maximize cooperation with local governments by supporting political and economic projects that would limit Russian influence. In addition, the flow of drugs from Afghanistan was increasing, which created a lot of criminal and social problems in the post-Soviet countries, including Russia, while the U.S. military avoided a decisive fight against drug production in Afghanistan.

Ultimately, Russia found itself witnessing an increased U.S. political influence and military presence near its borders, which it did not expect. At the same time, the intervention hadn't definitively eliminated the terrorist and drug threats, which was exactly what Russia had counted on. By the second half of the 2000s, Russia officially acknowledged that events in Afghanistan were likely to follow a negative scenario. For instance, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' foreign policy review in 2007 stated that "if the Afghan campaign ends in failure and the U.S. and NATO leave, the Central Asian countries and Russia will be left face to face with the consequences of the aggravated Afghan problem, primarily the drug and terrorist threat, with an upsurge of fundamentalist sentiments and the destabilization of the region"¹¹.

In fact, for Russia the situation became even more complicated. By the late 2000s, Russia faced a progressively tightening dilemma: if the U.S. and international coalition failed in Afghanistan, it would lead to a security crisis, while if they succeeded, the U.S. would connect Central Asia to South Asia instead of Russia. As such, Russia was interested in the international coalition neither fully failing nor fully succeeding.

¹⁰ Russia Threatens Afghanistan. 2000. *CBS News*. URL <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russiathreatens-afghanistan/>. (accessed 28.12.2022).

¹¹ Obzor vneshnej politiki rossijskoj federacii [Review of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation]. 2007. *Interros*. URL: http://www.intelros.ru/strategy/gos_rf/316-obzor_vneshnejj_politiki__podgotovlennyj_ministerstvom_inostrannykh_del_rossii.html (accessed 28.12.2022).

The Obama administration added another facet to this dilemma. Although top administration officials insisted that in March 2009 the US president approved a broad counterinsurgency strategy for Afghanistan¹², many saw Obama's inclination towards an exit¹³. The US could just depart, without ultimately failing or succeeding, which would leave Afghanistan's neighbors face to face with various risks originating from the country.

As Russia could no longer rely solely on the US mission in Afghanistan, it intensified consultations with all of Afghanistan's neighbors. In March 2009, after the SCO International Conference on Afghanistan in Moscow, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister A. Borodavkin stated that "efforts by the international community in stabilizing Afghanistan need rethinking"¹⁴. As Russia-US relations further deteriorated after 2014, Russia became even less reliant on the US. Throughout the 2010s, Russia shifted to a more active position on Afghanistan, preparing to manage the Afghan issue independently of the US (without necessarily being against it), instead working with Afghanistan's neighbors. Russia facilitated the so-called "Moscow format," which involved meetings of intra-Afghan forces and brought together representatives of all major factions of the Afghan military-political spectrum, including the Taliban movement. The idea behind this was that without American boots on Afghan soil, these factions could either restart a civil war (they were on the verge of doing this several times even with the Americans still present) or talk to each other and make deals to manage their country without US. Additionally, Russia engaged with powers around Afghanistan to reduce regional competition over the country.

The US attempted to impede Russian efforts to facilitate intra-Afghan dialogue, but after engaging in direct talks with Taliban and particularly after reaching the deal in 2020 (Machitidze 2020), the US relied on Russia to facilitate the intra-Afghan talks as the deal provided.

Following a relatively passive stance towards Afghanistan during the US occupation, Russia gradually increased its connections with various forces in the country, including the Taliban, up until moving to the front line. With the collapse of the Ghani government and the entire pro-American regime in Kabul in August 2021, Russia became one of the nine states that did not evacuate their embassies from Kabul, opting

¹² Press Briefing by Bruce Riedel, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, and Michelle Flournoy on the New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. 2009. *The White House*. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/press-briefing-bruce-riedel-ambassador-richard-holbrooke-and-michelle-flournoy-new-> (accessed 02.12.2022).

¹³ One of the authors of this article recorded in his personal archive the main moments of the meeting of Russian military and political experts with a major Western diplomat, the special representative for Afghanistan of one of the leading NATO countries, on the margins of the International Conference on Afghanistan under the aegis of the SCO, held in Moscow on March 27, 2009. This author met a special representative for Afghanistan from one of the leading NATO countries, who made it clear that Obama had begun to retreat from Afghanistan and stated that the "Najibullah option" was, under the current circumstances, the best that Western capitals could hope for.

¹⁴ Borodavkin A. *Mir i stabil'nost' v Afganistane otvechaet dolgosrochnym interesam Rossii* [Alexey Borodavkin: Peace and stability correspond to Russia's long-term interests]. 2009. *Infoshos*. URL <http://infoshos.ru/ru/?idn=3949> (accessed 28.12.2022).

instead for regular diplomatic contacts with the Taliban authorities, albeit without formally recognizing a new government. This move seemed inconsistent with Russia's previous policy, leading some observers to attribute it simply to anti-Americanism. Some believe that Russia is almost blinded by the idea of confronting America and underestimates the risks associated with the Taliban, while others claim that Russia has made a conscious and decisive choice in favor of an anti-American alliance with "bad guys" of all stripes.

The reality is that Russia relied on the most independent local force in Afghanistan (Safranchuk, Zhornist 2021). After the intra-Afghan talks were included among the provisions of the US-Taliban deal, Russia could not continue its own efforts towards reconciliation, as the US made clear they would consider it a blow to their agreement with the Taliban. As a result, Russia was forced to relinquish the initiative to the US with regard to reconciliation. However, the US was unable to make any significant progress in this regard, and the Taliban's military activities intensified during the summer of 2021.

During the US occupation of Afghanistan, the central government, whether under Karzai or Ghani, was largely under American control and acted as a US tool in regional geopolitics and geoeconomics. Leaders of the once-independent Northern Alliance entered into deals with the US, becoming so dependent on their financial support that they lost their autonomy. In the summer of 2021, when the Taliban launched a full-scale assault, Northern Alliance leaders were constrained by the central government in Kabul and the US and did not dare to fight. In comparison, the Taliban emerged as the most self-determined and independent actor, despite reservations about the movement's connections with Pakistan and its Inter-Service Intelligence. Dealing with such an independent actor is consistent with Russia's logic of a polycentric and diverse world.

India's quest for Central Asia and Afghanistan from a Russian perspective

The US intervention in Afghanistan served the interests of India, which had been disoriented by the collapse of Najibullah's government in 1992 (Dixit 1992). The intense civil war and the takeover of power by the Taliban movement ran counter to India's security interests. Indian External Affairs Ministry pointed out in one of its reports that Afghanistan had transformed into "a hotbed of extremism, terrorism and narcotics trafficking" under the Taliban rule¹⁵. Furthermore, the Taliban supported Kashmiri separatists and their involvement in the hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight in 1999¹⁶. The Taliban regime also exhibited religious intolerance by destroying

¹⁵ Annual Report 1999-2000. 2000. *Indian Ministry of External Affairs Library*. URL: <https://mealib.nic.in/?pdf2528?000> (accessed 28.12.2022).

¹⁶ Maley W. 2000. The Foreign Policy of Taliban. *Council on Foreign Relations Report*. URL : https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2005/08/ForeignPolicy_Taliban_Paper.pdf. (accessed 28.12.2022).

monuments and forcing Hindus to wear insignia¹⁷. As a result, India (together with Russia, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) supported the Northern Alliance¹⁸, a group of military commanders, mostly non-Pashtun, who subordinated, at least formally, to Rabbani, the last internationally recognized President of Afghanistan. India also considered his authority to be the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, India intensified its engagement in Afghanistan, becoming a significant contributor to various projects in the country. As an emerging power, India sought regional economic and political dominance, which included counterbalancing Pakistan's influence (Basu 2007). However, Indian investment in Afghanistan was not solely driven by its quest to counter Pakistani influence and prevent Afghanistan from turning into a terrorist hotbed¹⁹. Presumably, India's interests were more extensive, encompassing broader political stabilization and socio-economic modernization, which the US and US-led international coalition pledged to facilitate in Afghanistan. India was eager to contribute to this ambitious goal²⁰, and did not have reservations about Western geoeconomic plans for this part of the world. In fact, India welcomed the US's Greater Central Asia vision, and was interested in its full-scale implementation, which would eliminate longstanding barriers for transport connections between India and Afghanistan through Pakistan's territory, also connecting India to Central Asia via Afghanistan.

In the 2000s, India also intensified its policy towards Central Asia (Banerjee 2007). Following the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2002, India demonstrated significant interest in the organization, which was perceived at the time as a compact on regional affairs under Russian and Chinese leadership. In 2006, India, alongside Pakistan, joined the SCO as an observer. India viewed its association with the SCO as an effective means to facilitate its penetration into Central Asia and sought full membership in the organization. However, India's interest in Central Asia extended beyond political and economic issues, as it was also focused on security. In 2002, India invested in Tajikistan's Ayni airbase, upgrading the equipment and intending to station Indian air force units there²¹.

¹⁷ Taliban Slams Hindu Denouncements. 2001. *Washington Post*. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20200604123112/https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/aponline/20010524/aponline153713_000.htm (accessed 28.12.2022); India's move on demolition of Buddha statues in Afghanistan. 2001. *Indian Ministry of External Affairs Media Centre*. URL: <https://mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/9781/Q+4466++Indias+move+on+demolition+of+Buddha+statues+in+Afghanistan>. (accessed 02.12.2022).

¹⁸ Paliwal A. 2012. New Alignments, Old Battlefield: Revisiting India's Role In Afghanistan. *Carnegie India*. URL: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/6152017_Paliwal_IndiasRoleinAfghanistan_Web.pdf. (accessed 28.12.2022).

¹⁹ Constantino Z. 2020. The India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan. *United States Institute of Peace*. URL: https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/sr_462-the_india_pakistan_rivalry_in_afghanistan.pdf. (accessed 28.12.2022).

²⁰ Price G. 2013. India's Policy towards Afghanistan. *Chatham House*. URL: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0813pp_indiaafghanistan.pdf. (accessed 28.12.2022).

²¹ Ramachandran S. 2010. India air base grounded in Tajikistan. *Asia Times*. URL http://web.archive.org/web/20130212100151/http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/LL01Df02.html (accessed 28.12.2022).

From the Russian perspective, India had the potential to play a constructive role in the stabilization of Afghanistan. Moreover, at the official level Russia did not oppose India's penetration into Central Asia, although its military aspects clearly ran counter to Russia's general policy of opposing any foreign military presence in the post-Soviet space. However, at a non-official level, India sensed some opposition. In reality, India did not receive a green light to proceed with its projects. Initially, Moscow appeared to be more open to an Indian military presence in the region than to a Western one. In 2005, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov raised the possibility of Russia and India jointly operating the Ayni base²³ implying that Moscow believed it would be able to control a limited Indian military presence. In subsequent years, however, Moscow made it impossible for India to establish a military presence in Tajikistan²⁴. Additionally, India failed to obtain full membership status at the SCO as quickly as it anticipated. India may have believed that the close relations between Russia and China worked against its interests, which was not entirely unfounded. In fact, Moscow also worried that the active Indian penetration into Central Asia could bring the India-Pakistan rivalry to the region, thereby complicating the regional security and political landscape for both Russia and China. Ultimately, India's full alignment with the Western geoeconomic vision for Central Asia and Afghanistan, which aimed to redirect Central Asia from Russia to the south, was probably the most fundamental issue. India was willing to actively participate in this broad geoeconomic agenda, even if it was at the expense of Russian interests.

Conclusion

On the conceptual level, Russia is known as a champion of multipolarity in the world affairs, opposing the post-Cold War unipolar moment, the American Exceptionalism and hegemony. In many ways, Russia has been consistent in translating these holistic ideas into practice. An example of this is Russia's traditional appreciation of India as a global power whose voice on core issues of world affairs should be amplified. However, regional grievances can sometimes divert attention and resources that could otherwise be directed toward more global issues. From a Russian perspective, India's ongoing tensions with China and Pakistan are hindering its ascent as a global power. Therefore, Russia has always been interested in easing regional problems that impede countries like India from realizing their full potential in world politics.

²³ Aviabaza Ajni (Gissar) [Ayni airbase (Gissar)]. 2011. *Kommersant*. URL: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1765768>. (accessed 02.12.2022).

²⁴ In 2008 Russian signed a package of agreements on military cooperation with Tajikistan, which provided for Russia's return to the Ayni base without the Indians, although the Russian deployment never occurred as the two sides could not agree on the rent price.

In short, Russia recognized the importance of India as a key player in a multipolar world, but in regional Eurasian affairs, India participated in geoeconomic projects that were perceived by Russia as intended to undermine Russian interests. This complexity was evident in the issue of SCO enlargement. Arguably, Russia promoted the enlargement of the SCO and welcomed India's accession because it aimed to increase the SCO's role in global politics. Since the late 2000s, Russian officials have consistently defined the SCO as a pillar of a new international architecture, and Russian experts have noted that the SCO is one of the rapidly emerging centers of a multipolar world²⁵. In turn, India sought to join the SCO as a regional organization that was believed to represent a Russia-China pact, which aimed to act as a gatekeeper to the great powers' participation in Central Asian affairs. India anticipated that SCO membership would facilitate its own penetration into Central Asia. However, China, which also viewed the SCO as a regional organization and aimed to keep it that way, opposed India's membership request (Denisov, Safranchuk 2019).

The mismatch between global and regional dynamics, where Russia and India aligned on global issues but de-facto diverged on the Eurasian regional agenda, persisted throughout the 2000s and 2010s. However, this divergence is not inevitable. As this article's previous sections suggest, it was largely a result of the disproportionately high role that the US played in Eurasian affairs over the last two decades, through its military intervention in Afghanistan and related efforts to promote American geopolitical and geoeconomic projects for Afghanistan, Central, and South Asia. Russia and India had dissimilar attitudes towards the US's geoeconomic endeavors, and this gap expanded over time as Russia and India developed different trajectories in their bilateral relationship with the US. Thus, to some extent, the US factor had an impact on Russia-India relations in Eurasia, albeit indirectly as described. In fact, this was an impact neither Russia or India welcomed. With the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan, this factor has been eliminated, or at the very least, its importance has diminished greatly.

In the fall of 2021, a prevailing view emerged that international pressure should be exerted on the Taliban authorities in Afghanistan so that they accept certain restrictions on their rule, supposedly, in exchange for recognition of the Taliban government. The Taliban has established a political order in Afghanistan that essentially resembles their first rule from 1996 to 2001, albeit without the overt brutality that previously caused international outcry. The movement claims this is to accommodate concerns of the international community. Moreover, the Taliban views their accession to power as the liberation of Afghanistan from foreign occupation and alien customs imposed

²⁵ Luzianin S.G. 2015. *Shankhaikaia organizatsiia sotrudnichestva: model' 2014–2015* [Shanghai Cooperation Organization: model 2014–2015]. *Russian International Affairs Council*. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/RIAC-WP-SCO.pdf>. (accessed 28.12.2022).

from outside. Profoundly convinced of their political and ideological righteousness, the Taliban authorities were not ready to give in to outside pressure or even recognize its legitimacy. When pressure failed to yield results, the international community effectively divided into those who wished for the Taliban to fail and those who hoped for their success in governing the country. In this division, Russia and India are likely to be on the same side, along with most other regional actors in the area.

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Российско-индийское региональное сотрудничество по вопросам пост-американского Афганистана

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Россия всегда выступала за многополярную структуру международных отношений, выдвигая концепцию многополярности в качестве одной из основ своей внешней политики. По мере ухудшения отношений с Западом Россия предприняла несколько попыток создания евразийского проекта, в том числе, привлекая к нему незападных партнёров.

Индию Россия видела как один из центральных элементов стратегического перераспределения сил в мировой политике. Однако росту Индии как глобальной державы мешали её вовлечённость в региональные споры и нестабильные отношения с некоторыми соседями. Между Россией и Индией также существовали региональные разногласия по евразийским вопросам. Одним из расхождений был вопрос о роли ШОС: Россия с определенного момента рассматривала эту организацию в контексте всей мировой политики, а Индия в основном считала её региональным механизмом для обеспечения своих интересов в Центральной Азии. Значительную негативную роль в российско-индийских отношениях играл и американский фактор: стремление США к геэкономическому и геополитическому влиянию в Евразии за счет военного присутствия в Афганистане. Уход США из Афганистана может способствовать сближению позиций России и Индии по региональным вопросам, а именно, в Центральной Азии и в Афганистане. Обе страны заинтересованы в стабильном и безопасном Афганистане, который не представляет угрозы своим соседям. Россия и Индия могут принять правление Талибана, хоть и с определенными условиями, если оно поможет стабилизации обстановки в Афганистане. Авторы приходят к заключению, что, на фоне снижения значимости внешнего – американского – фактора в связи с уходом США из Афганистана, Россия и Индия смогут согласовать свои интересы в Центральной Азии и в Афганистане.

Ключевые слова: Россия, Индия, российско-индийские отношения, Евразия, Афганистан

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