**Geopolitical Rifts**

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The budding geo-political rivalry between the United States (US) and China has ushered in a new era of great power competition. The post-Cold War period has witnessed a shift in the global world order; marking an end to US dominance and the rise of revisionist autocracies: China and Russia. Since the mid-1950s, Beijing and Moscow have increasingly aligned, forming a strategic partnership to expand influence and undermine Washington. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and China’s threatening actions towards Taiwan and the South China Sea have shattered the US-China-Russia dialogue, profoundly impacting local political dynamics. In the aftermath, China and Russia have united to implement a regional strategy, aiming to reshape the area by forming alliances and new economic networks independent of the US dollar.

The US’s withdrawal from Afghanistan after two decades of conflict has left a vacuum. The Islamic Emirate, as a geo-strategic hotspot continues to leverage this shift to overcome historical isolation to be seen as a reputable state. US and NATO involvement in Afghanistan had always sparked tension with Russia and China due to their concerns about American military encirclement and containment. However, these two countries are using the American exit to expose the fragility of US hegemony and disclose its international incompetence. In filling the vacuum, they are now the promising new contenders for domination of the international system.

Since assuming control, the Taliban have lacked widespread international support due to their governance model. They continue to restrict women’s rights, repress dissent and suppress freedom of expression. The US has borne the flag of being the biggest obstacle in the Taliban’s quest for recognition. Western sanctions have frozen Afghanistan’s assets signalling disapproval and affecting their engagement with the world. As a result, their economy remains in limbo and they are confronted with insurmountable barriers hindering the acquisition of political, diplomatic and economic benefits to address the growing humanitarian crisis.

Governmental recognition is crucial for legitimacy and international engagement. The Taliban currently lack compliance with Western human rights and democratic principles but they remain adamant about seeking recognition without linking it to improbable changes in their policies or governing system.

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Afghanistan’s role is integral to the success of the Sino-Russian strategy of fostering a strong Eurasian bloc to counterbalance American influence. However, the spillover of the humanitarian crisis and militant upsurges from the country can threaten the stratagem. This volatility has prompted the Eurasian giants to intensify their engagement with the Taliban to create regional stability and nurture development.

Moscow appears to be leading international engagement and recognition of the Taliban by providing hard security guarantees to Afghanistan’s neighbours through military exercises to foster cooperation. However, it is Chinese investment that acts as a prospective salvation for Afghanistan.

They both have developed a sympathetic stance in regard to the Taliban regime evidenced in the 2021 Moscow summit and the 2024 UN security general meeting in Doha. The Sino-Russian support shows the international community that the Taliban are not isolated. Consequently, multiple countries have started to establish embassies and diplomatic missions in Afghanistan.

In refusing to toe the Western line of sanctioning and isolating the new Taliban regime Moscow and Beijing have been able to justify that American values do not resonate with non-Western societies and traditions. This has not only fortified their position as potential hegemons but is swaying global consensus in favour of the Taliban.

The efficacy of these advancements remains uncertain. Despite China’s economic interests in Afghanistan, it is hesitant to provide military force beyond its borders for a government that lends support to extremism within its territory. Likewise, Russia continues to grapple with the lingering memories of its bitter experience of Soviet occupation. These countries acknowledge that American military presence always provided a security blanket for the region. Today even long-standing allies of the Taliban; Pakistan and Iran have distanced themselves due to the Taliban government’s inaction in tackling the terrorism brewing on Afghan soil. Therefore, Chinese and Russian policymakers have yet to materialise trade deals and barring China no other country has formally recognised the Taliban government.

In the context of China and Russia’s pursuit of geopolitical dominance, Afghanistan plays a key role. Their ability to construct a “fortress Eurasia” to support violent revisionism and counterbalance US dominancy in the region hinges on Afghan cooperation. However, the idea that what’s detrimental to Washington benefits them is not guaranteed. They fear repercussions associated with supporting the Taliban. The Taliban need to create a semblance of stability by curbing the brewing terrorism or it will not be able to effectively leverage geo-political tensions to their advantage.

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