



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Russia, China, and the Prospect of US Military Bases in Central Asia

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,116, August 8, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Following the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, Washington is allegedly trying to reestablish a military presence in Central Asia, similar to what it did in the early 2000s. Though some level of cooperation is possible with Russia within the framework of great power relations (and much still depends on Moscow's goodwill), China opposes any American military or security expansion near its restive Xinjiang province.

The American exit from Afghanistan has created a power vacuum. The [quartet](#) of China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran stands to benefit the most from the US withdrawal. The area to accrue the least benefit is Central Asia, whose five states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), together with Afghanistan, represent one continuous geographical space. Separation would be geopolitically harmful to the Central Asian states, as security spillover from Afghanistan has a direct impact on Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan because of their long border.

From a long-term perspective, the American exit signals a shift in US foreign policy away from the Middle East and South Central Asia and toward the Indo-Pacific. America is essentially internalizing the limits of its military potential: it sees that out-competing China in the heart of Eurasia is a self-defeating geopolitical goal.

What the US has managed to accomplish so far in the region is exceptional for a sea power. It penetrated deep into Eurasia—into hostile lands that rarely, if ever, were tamed, even by continental powers in antiquity or the Middle Ages. The American expansion into Afghanistan thus represented a historical

anomaly. It could not continue for long without expanded cooperation with the neighboring states, which did not occur.

America's withdrawal frees up the space, offering China, Russia, and other Eurasian powers the opportunity to fill the gap—and in the process, divert resources and attention away from other critical theaters where the US is facing stiff resistance. In that light, there is suspicion in Beijing that the American exit might be a ploy. Greater Chinese involvement in Afghanistan might prove to be a trap.

A Chinese move to fill the power vacuum in Afghanistan would indeed be a bold geopolitical move, as history shows that no sole power has ever been able to control the space all the way from China to the Mediterranean for any significant length of time. Even the Mongols, who managed to unify this expanse, saw their empire divide into four warring parts and eventually fade away.

It is by no means clear that the Chinese would be able to succeed where others have failed. Beijing has greater resources than any other power in Eurasia but would still face myriad problems, from terrorism to nationalism to competition from other powers. In the end, its fate is likely to resemble that of previous unsuccessful attempts to influence and control the depths of Eurasia from a single center.

If the withdrawal from Afghanistan is in fact an American ploy, it is similar to what sea powers have done in the past to prevent continental powers from dominating entire continents. Great Britain stopped Napoleon's France by essentially cutting the country off from the sea and pushing it into the depths of the European continent. In the 20th century, the US managed to stop the Soviet Union by navigating Soviet expansionism into tricky places—like Afghanistan.

The US withdrawal could serve, somewhat surprisingly, as a basis for potential improvement in bilateral ties with Russia. When the Russian and American presidents met in June in Geneva, the media was flush with details of the summit. But because neither leader touched upon the question of Afghanistan at their segregated press conferences, world attention was drawn to other issues.

It has become increasingly clear that Afghanistan was in fact a top issue during the summit. The Russian daily *Kommersant* reported on July 17th that Putin offered Biden the use of Russian military bases in Central Asia for information-gathering from Afghanistan. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan host a

number of Russian military bases and other installations, some of which are close to the Afghan border.

There have also been several high-profile meetings in Washington recently between US and Central Asian diplomats about letting in at-risk Afghan citizens. For the moment, it seems that potential cooperation would involve the exchange of information gathered via drone.

There are reports that the US is allegedly trying to establish military bases in Central Asia. This was possible 20 years ago, because Moscow was willing to help the US build anti-terrorism momentum. This time around, it is unlikely that the US will be allowed into Central Asia. America established a military presence in Central Asia following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, but today's geopolitical configuration is strikingly different both in the region and across Eurasia. Conditions are not as conducive as they once were to a US presence. This is not only because the Central Asian states are now better prepared to militarily withstand the Taliban threat. Russia too has strengthened its military presence in the region, and will be unwilling to allow external powers in—especially in the age of Moscow's [exclusion policy](#).

Ultimately, while Russian approval for the stationing of military bases still matters (as shown by one of Sergei Lavrov's [statements](#)), it is not the only factor guiding the establishment of a new US presence in Central Asia. Another player—China—will be strongly opposed to any kind of American presence. In the early 2000s, concern about Taliban support for Xinjiang-based separatist and extremist groups pushed China to view the US efforts as fitting its own security interests. Since then, however, China-US ties have deteriorated sharply, with Beijing coming to see the US presence in Afghanistan as deviating from its initial anti-terrorism mission and focusing instead on containing China's regional ambitions. Beijing will therefore be a staunch opponent of America's military expansion to Central Asia—a critical region for Beijing's westward push.

Moreover, China would not be happy with a Western presence in Central Asia because the region borders on the restive Xinjiang province. China has been expanding both militarily and in terms of security in Central Asia. It has opened a [military base](#) in Tajikistan and over the past several years has increased the number of military exercises it conducts with Central Asia states. An external competitor risks disturbing the regional balance of power China has been carefully building.

The diplomacy around the Afghan conundrum shows that Russia and the US, despite being in tense competition over vast swathes of Eurasian territory, can sometimes cooperate. Russia's alleged decision to allow the US military to use

its facilities in Central Asia fits into Moscow's great power model. In this type of international relations, cooperation and competition coexist.

But whereas in the early 2000s Moscow supported America's offensive against terrorism in Afghanistan, its thinking has evolved since then. A potential American presence is now viewed in a negative light. Moreover, the issue is increasingly not only about Russia in Central Asia. The US now has to heed Chinese concerns as well, which will be extremely difficult.

Beijing would prefer to work closely with Moscow than with Washington. China and Russia share similar concerns, and both oppose a Western military presence. But Russia could cooperate with the US for the purpose of showing China that it is Moscow, not Beijing, that is in charge in the region, and that it will decide whether to permit or prevent the military presence of non-regional powers in Central Asia.

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