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Afghanistan, Part III: Russia and Central Asia

In [Part I](#) of this report, we reviewed the history of Afghanistan and why great powers have fought over it for centuries. In [Part II](#), last week, we examined how the United States exit from Afghanistan will affect Pakistan, India, and Iran. This week, our focus is on how the U.S. exit will play out for Russia and the Central Asian countries. We'll wrap up the series next week with Part IV, which will look at the implications for China and beyond, as well as the overall investment ramifications of the U.S. withdrawal.

Russia

Russian leaders [have gleefully lambasted the U.S. for its chaotic exit from Afghanistan and failure to build a stable government there for over two decades](#). However, the messy U.S. pullout actually presents Moscow with both opportunities and risks.

Opportunities. President Putin and his government see the U.S. not only as Russia's main rival in global geopolitics, but also as the main threat to its regional and domestic political position. Therefore, as Russia's declining population and narrow economic base continue to sap its power over time, anything that tarnishes the reputation of the U.S. will help bolster Russia's relative position.

- **Weaker U.S. Voice on Global Issues.** Russia and the U.S. have different

interests and views on a number of global issues, such as Russia's territorial aggression against Ukraine, its support for the repressive government in Syria, and its foreign cyberattacks and assassinations. Since the U.S. has led the charge in convincing a range of liberal democracies [to impose sanctions and other punishments on Russia](#), it is reasonable to think that Putin and his government will benefit if the U.S. sees its international reputation tarnished and influence reduced.

- **Less U.S. Influence in Central Asia.** Beyond weakening the U.S.'s stature in global politics, the pullout from Afghanistan will probably reduce U.S. presence and influence across Russia's traditional sphere of influence in Central Asia (see Figure 1, next page). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, Russia initially acquiesced to the desire from the U.S. to establish military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to support its operations against Afghanistan. However, Russian leaders later became uncomfortable with the U.S. presence and pushed for it to end, leading to the closure of the last U.S. base in the region during 2014. Since then, the U.S. has maintained contact with regional governments to the great chagrin of Moscow. In early 2021, the U.S. even [approached Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan about reestablishing military bases in the region to deal with a potential Taliban government in Afghanistan](#). President Putin [rejected the idea in his initial summit with President Biden in June 2021](#). Now that

the U.S. has left Afghanistan, it should give Russia more leeway to throw its weight around the region.

Figure 1.



(Source: ERC Securing Europe)

Risks. Despite the opportunities to weaken Russia’s main geopolitical rival and enhance Russia’s influence in its “near abroad,” President Putin and his government likely see a number of important risks arising from the U.S. withdrawal.

- **Refugee Flows.** Like leaders all over the world, Putin and his government probably looked with trepidation at the scenes of hundreds of thousands of Afghans desperately seeking to escape through Kabul’s airport in late August. The scenes of chaos served to drive home just how many Afghans want to leave the country. Naturally, many of them could be drawn to Russia by its relative wealth and proximity. Because of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, some emigrants may even have Russian language skills or experience working with Russians, which could draw them to Russia. As illustrated by the mass migration of Syrian refugees into Europe during 2015, any widescale migration of Afghans to Russia could generate sharp
- **Terrorism.** One key threat associated with any immigration of Afghans into Russia would be the risk of terrorist attacks or the spread of jihadist ideologies. Russia has a long and troubled history of discrimination against ethnic and Muslim minorities in areas such as Chechnya, including outright warfare that drew Muslim fighters into the country until President Putin brutally brought the fighting to an end in 2009. In the coming months, mass migration of Afghans to Russia could be used as cover for a new generation of Islamist militants to infiltrate Russia. Such a threat could play out over an extended period. For example, the legions of Central Asians who travel back and forth to Russia as migrant workers could also provide cover for Afghan militants to enter the country.
- **Drug Trafficking.** Afghanistan has long been one of the world’s key sources of opium and the illegal drugs derived from it. Importantly, some Afghan governments in the past tolerated or even promoted its cultivation as a way to raise funds. Under a new Taliban government that may not have absolute control over the country, Afghanistan could once again become a major source of opium, which would likely find its way into Russia, along with criminal gangs managing the drug trade.
- **Pressure to Defend CSTO Allies.** Even more unsavory than the prospect of Afghan migrants, terrorists, or drug dealers would be the need to defend Russia’s military allies in Central Asia. The key alliance here is the Collective

social tensions, increased government aid costs, and security concerns.

Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which currently consists of Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. These states have signed a mutual defense treaty that commits them to aid any member that gets attacked. Since Russia has the group's strongest military by far, it would likely be drawn into any conflict in which Afghanistan were to attack one of the Central Asian states on its border, i.e., Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan (which has twice been a member of the CSTO), or Tajikistan (where Russia maintains a military base). As the Taliban began to take more control over Afghanistan in August, Russia [launched a series of joint military exercises with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on the Tajik border with Afghanistan in order to reassure its CSTO allies and warn the Taliban off from any territorial adventurism.](#)

However, after seeing the Soviet Union and then the U.S. mired in Afghanistan for so many years, Russia would be reluctant to get involved in any actual military operations in the region.

- **More U.S. Focus on Russia.** More broadly, the pullout from Afghanistan will give the U.S. more leeway to focus its attention and resources on Russia and China, which U.S. leaders now see as their top priority. Indeed, in justifying his decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, President Biden explicitly cited the opportunity to pivot U.S. efforts toward Beijing and Moscow.

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan

For the Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan, the U.S. pullout creates many of the same opportunities and threats that Russia sees. The biggest difference may be that the pullout enhances Russia's political

position versus Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Opportunities. Just as the U.S. withdrawal creates space for Russia to increase its influence over the Afghan government, it may also create space for the Central Asian nations to put more direct pressure on the Afghans. In some ways, the Central Asian states may even have more incentive to do so. For example, the Uzbeks and Tajiks may want to promote the interests of their ethnic brethren who make up most of the population in northern Afghanistan (see Figure 2). Additionally, cross-border trade and migration could tempt Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to try to build closer ties with the Afghan government, which now may be easier than when the U.S. was involved.

Figure 2.



(Source: New York Review of Books)

Risks. As noted above, the U.S. withdrawal will likely create some of the same risks for the Central Asian states as it does for Russia. All the same, they will face a couple of additional risks.

- **Refugees, Drugs, and Terrorism.** As with Russia, the Central Asian states face the risk of destabilizing refugee flows, drug trafficking, and terrorism, especially if civil war or other political

or economic instability takes hold in the new Afghanistan. Indeed, in fear of importing Islamist terrorism, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan [have already declared that they won't allow Afghan refugees to settle permanently in their territories](#). Given that Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are much poorer than Russia, they would likely have a harder time dealing with those challenges than Russia would.

- ***Territorial Incursions.*** Until the new Afghan government gets on its feet, its foreign policy will be a question mark, and there will be some question about how aggressively it will approach any disputes with its neighbors.
 - For instance, even though the Taliban claims to have crushed all military resistance among the ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan's northeastern province of Panjshir, it is likely that some opponents will continue fighting from redoubts in the rugged mountains ringing that area or even from safe havens in Tajikistan. If that situation develops, it is conceivable that the Afghans could launch a military incursion into Tajikistan, especially if they are emboldened by their success in pushing out the U.S. and its allies and by their seizure of modern, powerful weapons abandoned by the U.S. forces. As a sign of the possibility of conflict between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, the Tajik government has already vowed not to recognize the Taliban government if it doesn't respect ethnic minorities.
 - Other disputes could conceivably prompt Afghan designs on Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan.

Moreover, Moscow may ultimately prove reluctant to get pulled into a military conflict in the region, so it may find an excuse not to come to their aid, even though Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are members of the CSTO.

- ***Russian Meddling.*** Paradoxically, it could also be unpalatable for the Central Asian states if they face an Afghan security threat and Russia sends military forces or otherwise comes to their aid. President Putin has long sought to strengthen his control over the former Soviet republics. Indeed, some observers have accused him of wanting to reconstitute the former USSR under Russian control. It's therefore possible that Putin would insist that the Central Asian states pay a high price for Russian defensive assistance, whether it be in the form of political or economic concessions that benefit Moscow.

Teeing Up Part IV

In sum, Part III shows that Russia and the Central Asian states of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan all face opportunities and risks from the U.S. abandonment of Afghanistan. Without doubt, Russia will try to portray the U.S. withdrawal as a humiliating defeat that delegitimizes Western democracy and tarnishes the reputation of the U.S. Russia and the Central Asian states will probably also seek to boost their influence in Afghanistan for their own purposes. Nevertheless, all will face a range of negative consequences ranging from the potential for destabilizing refugee flows and terrorism to the risk of eventual military threats from Afghanistan.

In Part IV, we will wrap up this series by reviewing the implications for China and beyond. As always, we'll also end with a

discussion of the likely investment ramifications of the U.S. withdrawal and the new geopolitical dynamics in the region.

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