

# WEEKLY ANALYSIS

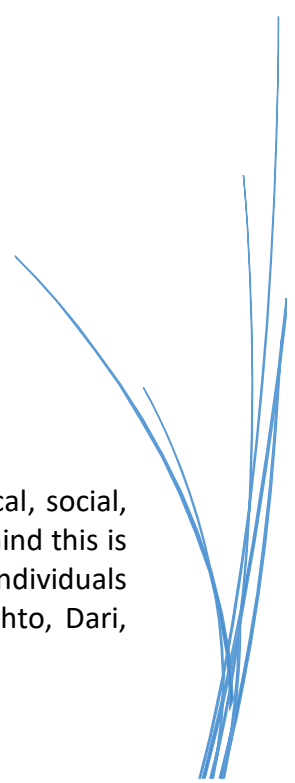
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## THE OBJECTIVES OF CHINA AND RUSSIA IN AFGHANISTAN: POINTS OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

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Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



## THE OBJECTIVES OF CHINA AND RUSSIA IN AFGHANISTAN: POINTS OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

### Introduction

Over the past couple of weeks, Kabul has witnessed visits from two high-ranking officials representing two major Asian powers, China and Russia. On December 3, Yu Xiaoyong, China's Special Representative for Afghanistan, arrived in Kabul following his visit to Pakistan. Shortly after, on December 6, Sergei Shoigu, Secretary of the Russian Security Council, led a delegation to the Afghan capital.

Both delegations held multiple meetings with officials of the Islamic Emirate, including the Deputy Prime Ministers, as well as the Ministers of Defense and Interior. The discussions covered a range of topics, including strengthening political relations, enhancing economic and transit cooperation, and exploring investment opportunities in Afghanistan's mining sector.

These visits raise several pertinent questions: What are China and Russia seeking in Afghanistan? What are the points of convergence and divergence in their interests? And most importantly, how can Afghanistan leverage these relations to serve its national interests?

This analysis seeks to address these questions and shed light on the evolving dynamics between Afghanistan and these two regional powers.

### THE OBJECTIVES OF CHINA AND RUSSIA IN AFGHANISTAN

China and Russia's interests in Afghanistan broadly encompass political, security, and economic dimensions. While each country has its unique priorities, their overarching goals can be understood through a closer examination of these three areas:

#### Political Objectives

- **Support for a politically aligned regime:** Both China and Russia aim to back a political system in Afghanistan that aligns with their strategic interests. Reflecting on the past two decades, the lack of a cooperative regime in Afghanistan was a significant source of frustration for these two powers. During the 20-year republic, the political structure—supported and shaped by



Western powers—was seen as an ally of the West and an adversary to Eastern powers like China and Russia.

However, with the Islamic Emirate's return to power, both nations have shifted their efforts toward fostering relations with a political regime that does not oppose them. The warm and collaborative approach that China and Russia have adopted toward the Islamic Emirate reflects their recognition that the new government is not strategically aligned with the West. Consequently, both countries have prioritized strengthening their interactions and relationships with the Emirate as a key political goal.

- **Pursuing relations free from third-party influence:** Another critical political objective for China and Russia is ensuring that their relations with Afghanistan remain independent of third-party influence—particularly that of the United States or other Western powers. Under the previous regime, Afghanistan's strong Western ties were a source of discontent for both nations.

In the eyes of Beijing and Moscow, the Islamic Emirate is still in the early stages of consolidating its stability as a governing authority, warranting their support. Russian President Vladimir Putin recently emphasized this perspective, stating, *"We cannot overlook the fact that Afghanistan is moving toward stability, and Moscow maintains and will continue its relations with the current authorities in the country."*

Such statements underscore the belief that Afghanistan now has a politically independent system. To ensure this independence remains intact—particularly from Western influence—China and Russia aim to cultivate deep, strategic relationships with the Islamic Emirate.

- **Political alignment on regional and global issues:** Governments worldwide strive to build alliances, and China and Russia view Afghanistan as a potential partner in advancing their regional and global agendas. While the Islamic Emirate has so far maintained a neutral stance on international and regional issues, this neutrality is encouraging for both nations. They see Afghanistan's current position as an opportunity to gradually align the Emirate's views with their interpretations of global and regional dynamics.

Regionally, Afghanistan's approach already overlaps with China's and Russia's interests in certain areas, particularly in combating groups like ISIS, opposing separatist movements, and addressing narcotics trafficking. Nevertheless, both nations are



actively working to further shape the Emirate's perspectives on broader international issues to align with their strategic narratives and objectives.

## Security Objectives

### 1. Ensuring Afghanistan Does Not Serve as a Threat

The foremost security objective driving China and Russia's engagement with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is to prevent any threats to their territories or interests originating from Afghan soil. This goal is critical, as Afghanistan has been a source of significant security challenges for both countries over the past three decades.

China and Russia are particularly vulnerable to potential security risks emanating from Afghanistan, making this objective central to their foreign policies. A key reassurance for both countries is the Islamic Emirate's pledge not to allow Afghan territory to be used against other nations. While the Emirate has adhered to this commitment over the past three years, lingering concerns persist.

For instance, Chinese officials have expressed alarm over reports of more than 20 terrorist groups operating within Afghanistan. Similarly, Russia has repeatedly raised concerns about the presence of ISIS and other militant groups in the country. Recent incidents, such as the killing of a Chinese national in Tajikistan by an attacker reportedly crossing from Afghanistan, further underscore these anxieties.

Despite these challenges, both China and Russia draw confidence from the Emirate's strong resolve to combat terrorist groups—evident in both rhetoric and action. For example, a key focus of the Russian National Security Secretary's recent visit to Afghanistan was fostering cooperation on counterterrorism efforts. This shared commitment to fighting terrorist groups has become a cornerstone of the growing partnership between the Islamic Emirate, China, and Russia.

### 2. Preventing Afghanistan's Inclusion in Hostile Military Alliances

Another major security concern for China and Russia is ensuring Afghanistan does not become part of any military alliances hostile to their interests, particularly those led by extra-regional powers like the United States. In the past, Afghanistan's military alignment with the U.S. and NATO was a significant source of tension for both nations.



Afghanistan's strategic proximity to China and Russia makes its geopolitical alignment particularly critical. Should Afghanistan join an alliance with a foreign adversary, it could pose a substantial geostrategic threat to both countries. To counter this risk, China and Russia aim to deepen their security cooperation with Afghanistan, thereby minimizing the likelihood of the country being absorbed into an antagonistic coalition.

### **3. Direct Oversight of Afghanistan's Security Situation**

Both Russia and China are deeply invested in closely monitoring Afghanistan's internal security landscape, particularly the activities of terrorist groups operating within the country. While they trust the Islamic Emirate's overarching governance and stability, full assurance that Afghanistan poses no threat to their security has yet to be achieved.

For instance, Russia has moved closer to removing the Islamic Emirate from its list of banned groups, signaling increasing confidence in Afghanistan's current regime. However, lingering concerns about the presence, diversity, and capabilities of terrorist groups necessitate direct oversight.

To address these uncertainties, both countries seek to maintain a physical presence and close engagement in Afghanistan. This direct involvement allows them to monitor the evolving security dynamics and ensure that threats are effectively managed. Naturally, achieving such a goal requires deepening their interaction and collaboration with the Islamic Emirate.

#### **Economic Objectives**

In addition to political and security goals, both China and Russia pursue significant economic objectives in Afghanistan. During the previous Afghan republic, China had secured a few economic agreements, such as the Aynak copper mine project and oil extraction in the Amu Darya Basin. Similarly, the Afghan government often portrayed the situation as open to Russian economic engagement. However, the presence of the United States in Afghanistan restricted both countries from freely engaging in large-scale economic cooperation.

The return of the Islamic Emirate to power has opened new opportunities for countries, particularly China and Russia, to establish deeper economic ties with Afghanistan. As a result, both nations have intensified their economic interactions and introduced substantial economic plans centered on the following key areas:



## 1. Strengthening Economic Relations, with a Focus on Exports to Afghanistan

China has historically been a leading exporter to Afghanistan. However, recent efforts to enhance bilateral economic ties have been more ambitious. For instance, China has announced the removal of customs tariffs on Afghan imports and is working to establish a dedicated railway line as the primary route for trade between the two countries. Pilot tests for this railway line have already been conducted, showcasing China's commitment to facilitating trade with Afghanistan.

Similarly, Russia, which once had significant economic ties with Afghanistan, found its presence diminished over the past three decades due to internal conflict and the U.S. presence in the region. Now, Russia is eager to reinvigorate its economic relationship with Afghanistan. With its expertise in exporting oil, food commodities like wheat and cooking oil, and industrial machinery—products highly valued in Afghanistan—Russia aims to increase trade volume with the country.

A focal point of the recent visit by Russia's National Security Secretary to Afghanistan was to explore ways to expand trade. Additionally, Russia has recognized Afghanistan's strategic importance as a transit corridor between the north and south. This has sparked interest in leveraging Afghanistan's geographic position to establish overland trade routes linking Russia, Central Asia, Pakistan, and India. Notably, Moscow has expressed its willingness to participate in the Trans-Afghan Corridor project.

## 2. Investment in Afghanistan's Mining Sector

Afghanistan's immense natural resources, estimated to be worth trillions of dollars, serve as a major attraction for global investors. The Islamic Emirate has encouraged investment in the mining sector, opening the doors to all interested parties. However, Russian participation in this sector remains relatively limited, despite the country's superior expertise and technology in mining and resource extraction.

Russia is beginning to realize the risk of losing this lucrative opportunity to competitors. Consequently, Moscow has dispatched delegations to secure its share in Afghanistan's mining market. In contrast, China has been much more proactive and successful in this area. Over the past three years, China has emerged as the largest investor in Afghanistan, with cumulative investments reaching approximately \$500 million. Currently, over 100 Chinese companies have registered with Afghanistan's Ministry of Mines for investment opportunities.



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## SHARED INTERESTS OF CHINA AND RUSSIA IN AFGHANISTAN

An analysis of the objectives and interests of China and Russia in Afghanistan reveals several areas of common ground. These shared interests include the following:

### 1. Support for a Unified Central Government in Afghanistan

Both China and Russia, given their geographical proximity to Afghanistan, have a mutual interest in the establishment of a strong, unified central government in the country. Their bilateral cooperation with the Islamic Emirate is driven by the belief that such a government would serve their regional interests as well as those of their partners.

However, as discussed under their political and security goals, this support is conditional on the government in Afghanistan being independent and free from the influence of Western powers. The Islamic Emirate's adoption of a neutral foreign policy has been a strategic move that aligns well with these expectations. A neutral Afghanistan is seen as far more beneficial to regional players like Russia and China than one aligned with Western blocs.

### 2. Support for the Islamic Emirate's Efforts against Hostile Groups

The presence of extremist groups in Afghanistan poses a serious threat to both China and Russia. Afghanistan has often served as a Launchpad for terrorist groups targeting these two nations. Recognizing this, the Islamic Emirate has taken robust steps to combat such groups, particularly ISIS, which has been largely eradicated under its rule.

This shared understanding of the threat posed by extremist groups has fostered a common ground between China, Russia, and the Islamic Emirate. Both nations have publicly commended the Islamic Emirate's decisive actions against ISIS and expressed joint support for its continued efforts in this regard.

### 3. Opposition to the Return of Western Forces, Especially the United States

Another shared priority for China and Russia in Afghanistan is preventing the re-establishment of a Western military presence, particularly by the United States. While neither country has yet been able to fully replace the financial assistance once provided by Western nations, both are actively working to strengthen their economic ties and invest in Afghanistan. Their goal is to reduce Afghanistan's dependence on Western aid





and resources, thereby eliminating any need for a renewed Western foothold in the country.

#### **4. Non-Interference in Afghanistan's Internal Affairs**

Over the past three years, both China and Russia have demonstrated a policy of non-interference in Afghanistan's domestic affairs, particularly its internal politics. While both nations occasionally emphasize the importance of forming an inclusive government in Afghanistan, their broader approach has been to refrain from meddling in Afghanistan's internal matters or supporting specific factions.

Instead, their primary strategy has been to engage transparently and constructively with the current Afghan government. This approach reflects a pragmatic policy of working with the existing authorities while supporting ongoing developments in the country.

#### **DIVERGING INTERESTS OF CHINA AND RUSSIA IN AFGHANISTAN**

While China and Russia share common interests and exhibit significant alignment in Afghanistan, certain areas—particularly economic opportunities—could potentially lead to competition between the two nations.

##### **1. Competition in the Extractive Sector**

Although political and security issues currently present no major sources of disagreement, economic interests—specifically in Afghanistan's mining sector—could become a point of contention. Both China and Russia are likely to compete for investment opportunities in Afghanistan's lucrative mining industry.

China may aim to dominate the mining sector, potentially seeking an exclusive role in Afghanistan's resource extraction. However, it is unlikely that China would explicitly attempt to block Russia's involvement in this domain. Moreover, the Islamic Emirate's open economic policies could play a crucial role in preventing such competition by ensuring equal opportunities for both nations.

##### **2. Transit and Connectivity Projects**

Another potential area of divergence lies in transit and connectivity projects. Although Afghanistan does not yet hold a prominent position in China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing is working to include Afghanistan in northern and southern trade corridors. This includes trilateral talks between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, as well



as discussions around the Wakhan Corridor, a potential future route that could become part of the BRI.

China's ambitions also extend to linking Afghanistan with Iran through projects like the "Five Nations Railway Corridor," which would strengthen regional connectivity. While these transit plans do not directly involve Russia, they could diminish Russia's strategic role in the region if Moscow perceives itself to be sidelined.

### 3. Competing Visions for Regional Trade

Russia, on the other hand, is eager to integrate Afghanistan into its own regional trade and transit networks. Moscow has expressed strong interest in participating in the Trans-Afghan Corridor, which connects Central Asia with South Asia. This project is critical to Russia's plans to expand its energy exports—particularly oil and gas—to South Asian markets, including Pakistan and India.

At face value, the transit goals of China and Russia might seem to conflict. However, it is important to note that such differences are not necessarily adversarial. Unless inflamed by external forces, such as Western narratives portraying the two as rivals, these divergent objectives are unlikely to escalate into significant disputes.

### CONCLUSION

In the past, the presence of the United States in Afghanistan and the establishment of a pro-Western government were significant obstacles to the greater involvement of China and Russia in the country. However, with the U.S. withdrawal and the resurgence of the Islamic Emirate, a major opportunity has opened for Asian powers—particularly Russia and China—to expand their political, security, and economic influence in Afghanistan. Over the past three years, these two countries have sent high-ranking political, military, and economic delegations to Afghanistan to strengthen ties and secure their economic interests. Recent examples include the visit of China's special envoy to Kabul and the visit of Russia's Security Council Secretary, leading a high-level delegation. All these visits reflect the effort of both countries to advance their political, security, and economic goals.

Both Russia and China have not only expanded their political, security, and economic engagement with the Islamic Emirate but have also taken additional steps to deepen their relationship. For example, China has accepted the official ambassador of the



Islamic Emirate, and Russia has removed the Emirate from its list of banned groups. In general, China and Russia are intensifying their relations with the Islamic Emirate at a high level. However, the question arises: how much will strengthening bilateral ties with each of these countries lead to competition between them in Afghanistan? While both Russia and China have distinct priorities in Afghanistan, they are working to reduce any potential rivalry by adopting a coordinated approach. As examined in this discussion, the areas of cooperation and alignment between these two major powers in Afghanistan far outweigh the points of contention.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The Islamic Emirate should leverage the attention of both major powers, China and Russia, to strengthen its political position.
2. The Islamic Emirate should make effective use of the economic capacities of both Russia and China to foster the country's economic growth.
3. By addressing the reasonable security concerns of both countries, the Islamic Emirate can create an environment where economic priorities take precedence for Russia and China.
4. Although both Russia and China aim to bring Afghanistan within their spheres of influence, the Islamic Emirate should maintain a balanced approach in its relations with both countries, especially in the context of its stance against Western powers.
5. The Islamic Emirate should adopt sensible policies to safeguard the country's national interests, thereby minimizing any potential conflict between countries in Afghanistan.

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