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***Session V:  
Trilateral Initiatives focusing on Afghanistan:  
US – China – Pakistan and Russia – China – Pakistan***

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## Trilateral Initiatives focusing on Afghanistan: US-China-Pakistan and Russia-China-Pakistan

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### 1 Intersection of Russian and Western Interests in Afghanistan

In the short and medium term, the degree of U.S. participation in Afghanistan affairs will depend on whether Washington decides to enlarge its military and political footprint in this country. But even if the troop departure from Afghanistan is complete (that is not the case under the Trump administration), the United States, as a global power, will remain concerned with everything that happens around the world, including in Afghanistan.

That said, the major motivation behind American presence and interest in Afghanistan—preventing the creation of terrorist bases in the country—is substantially less relevant now than it was when the U.S. invasion began in 2001. Afghanistan has stopped being a central problem for U.S. foreign and military policies and is quickly becoming peripheral. Of course, it will continue to be of some interest to the United States in the context of Washington’s policies on China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian countries, but this interest will be limited.

Due to a radical deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations that has taken place since the start of 2014, there are few prospects for cooperation between Moscow and Washington on issues related to Afghanistan—for instance, on combating drug trafficking. Nevertheless, targeted cooperation in areas of mutual interest should not be excluded.

As for the Russian position, for Moscow the region of South Asia will be a source of threats to national security such as political instability, international conflicts, terrorism and drug trafficking. Russia intends to respond to these threats, while also developing closer bilateral relations with Central Asian and South Asian countries, and playing a more prominent role in various international political formats. South Asia is seen as a region where integration processes are very important for Russia and for the Russian economy (with a recognition that India is the main engine of economic growth in the region, and China is the main external engine of economic growth). Russia has clear priorities in South Asia. India is seen as a privileged strategic partner; Afghanistan as a close neighbor; Pakistan as a leading regional

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power, roughly on a par with Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Iran or Saudi Arabia as far as Russian foreign policy is concerned.

The transfer of power in Kabul and the signing of the agreements with the United States and NATO again raise the question of security cooperation between Russia, Afghanistan and its Western partners. Russia's permanent representative to NATO Alexander Grushko said in an interview that Russia is interested in continuing to help Afghanistan on a bilateral basis. However, the cooperation on Afghanistan between Russia and U.S./NATO was effectively frozen by the West in April, 2014. Expressing the official position of the Russian Federation, Ambassador Grushko called this decision counterproductive.

It is hard to disagree with this assessment. This method of punishing Russia for the annexation of Crimea deprives the U.S. and NATO of the opportunities to strengthen Afghanistan's defense capabilities and counteract the threats of terrorism and drug trafficking more effectively. Rejecting Russia's assistance in Afghanistan looks incredibly wasteful given the Coalition troop downsize in the country as well as the need to commit substantial resources to combatting the ISIS threat in the Middle East.

All three avenues of Russia's cooperation with Afghanistan and Western countries were important for securing Afghanistan's peaceful future. Russia supplied Afghan air force with helicopters, provided for their maintenance and trained the country's specialists. It also participated in counteracting drug production and trafficking. In addition, Russia ensured the transit of U.S. and NATO military and civilian cargo through its territory. In September 2013, Russia and Afghanistan initiated the fourth avenue of their cooperation – border security.

The Ukrainian crisis is not going to be resolved in the foreseeable future, and Moscow is certainly not planning to reconsider its decision to annex Crimea. Therefore, the United States and NATO have no reasons to revisit their decision to curtail their cooperation with Russia, including the cooperation on Afghanistan. This means that Afghanistan will remain a hostage to the situation in Eastern Europe.

At this time, Washington and Brussels are confident that they can do without Russia's participation in solving Afghanistan's security problems. President Ghani's coming to power and the signing of the security and defense cooperation agreements only boosted their confidence, since now the West ostensibly created favorable conditions for itself in Afghanistan, which obviates the need to consider other external powers.

Many in Russia, Afghanistan and other countries of the region do not believe so. First, despite the resolution of the political standoff between the two presidential candidates, the situation in Afghanistan remains volatile. To ensure the regime's survival, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai will have to balance between the interests of

various forces inside the country, including the anti-Western factions, and external forces – Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India and the Central Asian republics. The delicate position that President Ghani found himself in upon becoming president will preclude him from conducting exclusively U.S. and NATO policies.

Second, whether the West likes it or not, Russia has long participated in multilateral and bilateral projects that assist Afghanistan. The most promising recent example is the negotiations between Russia, Afghanistan and India, which resulted in an agreement on the India-sponsored export of Russian weapons to Afghanistan in 2015.

If the United States and NATO continue to refrain from cooperating with Russia on Afghanistan, Russia will keep helping Afghanistan within the format of its bilateral agreements with Kabul and multilateral agreements with regional powers, or through international organizations, such as SCO. The assistance Russia and other regional powers render to Afghanistan will continue to increase irrespective of Kabul's cooperation with Washington and Brussels.

If common sense prevails in the West and its cooperation with Russia on Afghanistan restarts, consolidated response to security threats in Afghanistan will be far more effective than the current disjointed efforts by various countries. Besides, the coordinated policy formulated by external powers will contribute to Afghanistan's political stability. The lack of such a policy will only lead to the escalation of internal political strife and Kabul's weakness in face of security threats.

## 2 Pakistani Interests in Afghanistan, Providing Channels for Chinese Engagements, and U.S.-Pakistani Disputes

Today Pakistan is the most active and interested player on the Afghan stage. Pashtun tribes that live along both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border act as the major link connecting the two countries, and the border that divides these tribes is a source of serious conflict between Islamabad and Kabul.

Pakistan has been actively and consistently involved in Afghanistan's internal affairs since the second half of the 1970s. This involvement will increase after the international coalition troops depart (if and when it happens).

When it comes to other key players in Afghanistan, Pakistan has very uneven relations with the United States, close ties with China, and an alliance with Saudi Arabia. In Central Asia, Islamabad has held some sway over Dushanbe and Tashkent since the 1990s.

Pakistan cannot become Russia's ally, but Russia should not necessarily treat Pakistan as a rival, let alone an adversary, in Afghanistan. Pragmatic cooperation with

Islamabad on the issues of terrorism and drug trafficking may prove helpful to Moscow.

The Pakistan army's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was actively involved in the organization of the meetings with China and the United States which, according to some writers, proves Islamabad's desire for a peaceful settlement of the situation in Afghanistan.

One of that meetings was hosted by China and happened in Urumqi. China wants to be more involved in the Afghan problem than it has before. Most of the world's media, including Russian, replicated the positive assessment of the meeting in Urumqi. However, reasons for optimism are much fewer than reasons to doubt the success of this initiative.

The meeting was reportedly not a negotiation, but preliminary consultations about the beginning of negotiations. The fact that several years after negotiations started between the Afghan government and the Taliban, they decided to restart negotiations from scratch indicates the failure of the previous efforts and casts doubt on the prospects of future ones.

These Taliban representatives were chosen to come to Urumqi because of their contacts with Pakistan's ISI, the writers said, raising questions about their dependence and links with Pakistan's intelligence service.

The role of Pakistan in the organization of the meeting between the Afghan authorities and the Taliban is the most controversial issue. The media articles portrayed it as evidence of Pakistan's constructive approach to the Afghan problem. Such an assessment may be both correct and incorrect. It is not, however, the main reason for the active role of Pakistan in the meeting.

The primary reason why Pakistan and China chose to host the secret negotiations is that it enabled Islamabad to increase its influence over the political processes in Afghanistan. In earlier years, Pakistani felt that its participation in Afghan affairs was deliberately limited by other countries, demonstrated by NATO's decision not to invite Pakistan to the Lisbon summit in 2010. Pakistan had felt its influence curtailed during the tenure of Hamid Karzai as President of Afghanistan, and it continues to be curtailed under the President Ghani rule.

The strengthening of Pakistan's influence, evident from the Taliban's list of participants of the meeting, will not necessarily create the best conditions for successful negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Pakistan's vision for Afghanistan's future is not shared by everyone, not only in Kabul but also in the Taliban itself.

What is China's interest in this controversial initiative? Despite providing support for the new format of talks in Beijing, China is hardly ready to settle for being a

“broker” in the negotiation process between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, as media reports in 2014 suggested.

China's involvement in the Afghan theatre is growing. Beijing is involved in all major dialogue formats related to Afghanistan, including at the United Nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Istanbul dialogue, the ‘China-Afghanistan-Pakistan’ dialogue and the ‘Russia-India-China’ format, not to mention the active bilateral Sino-Afghan contacts.

In the summer of 2014, the Chinese Foreign Ministry introduced a position of special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and named Sun Yuxi, a former ambassador to Afghanistan in 2002-2005, to the post.

If the Urumqi meeting leads to full-fledged negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban, it will be a political outcome supported by Beijing to achieve a certain goal. In case contacts between the Afghan authorities and the Taliban go forward, China’s goal is not only to achieve a political solution to the Afghan problem through peaceful negotiations.

It would also give China an opportunity to establish stable channels of communication with the Taliban, while getting a better understanding of the capabilities and limitations of Pakistan in Afghanistan.

In this context the U.S. policy towards Pakistan gives good news for Moscow. It could mean discontinuation of the United States’ providing military and financial assistance to Pakistan. The Trump administration could try to put relations with Pakistan on a pragmatic footing. It would alienate a part of the elite in Pakistan and make the rapport between Moscow and Islamabad easier and faster. However, there are doubts in Russian readiness to take long-term and massive commitments in Pakistan, but that is another story.

### 3 Russia’s Policy regarding China, Pakistan and Taliban

After the start of the U.S.-lead counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan Moscow decided to limit its involvement by the supporting role. But after the U.S. decisions to limit military footprint Afghanistan, the Russian leadership could realize, that neither Kabul nor Washington with allies has enough capabilities now to end terrorism and narcotics evils from the Afghanistan soil. That is why Russia ceased to be supportive force for the U.S.\NATO mission and started its own policy toward Afghanistan.

In short, this policy means contacts with various actors inside Afghanistan and efforts to create a regional framework for resolving problems in this country. It still unclear, what do the Russian authorities want from Taliban: communication channel only, or dialogue and common interests?

There is no doubt, that Russia needs the communication channel with Taliban and other armed groups inside Afghanistan. Release of Russian pilots Petrenko and Sevastyanov from the Taliban's captivity in recent years explains, that the main role for this channel is to help Russian citizens.

As for the Russian common interests and dialogue with Taliban, these possibilities will remain cloudy due to the Taliban inability to stop both terrorist activities inside Afghanistan and neighboring countries and involvement in drugs production and trafficking.

There are two more or less realistic ways of interpreting Russian statements about the common interests and dialogue between Moscow and Taliban. (alleged attempts of Russia to destabilize Afghanistan are hardly seen as an interpretation close to reality)

The first way could be a look at these statements through the context of serious tensions between Russia and the United States after the Crimean annexation in 2014. Dr. Omar Nessar, Head of the Centre for Modern Afghanistan Studies believes: "Russian statements about contacts with Taliban were linked to the U.S.-Russian relations. It looked like a signal from Moscow, that in the time of President Obama the situation was deteriorating more and more. It would help to create good atmosphere for quickly improving relations with the Trump administration. After the end of 2016 the Russian officials stopped talking about the dialogue with Taliban, though the contacts could remain between Moscow and the movement."

If the relations between Russia and the United States go well, Russia will likely keep the communication channel with Taliban open, but it will not raise questions about common interests with the movement. If the U.S.-Russian relations go badly, Moscow will likely try to challenge every part of the U.S. policy towards Afghanistan, and Russian statements about Taliban will be used for this purpose.

The second way of interpreting the statements about the common interests and dialogue between Moscow and Taliban could be a look at them as a test for Taliban. If the movement is responsive, positive, and ready for serious concessions in the fields of terrorism and narcotics, Russia could move forward. But if Taliban is not ready to quit long-term criminal practices, Russia will return to minimal level of contacts with the movement.