

AFGHANISTAN: THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE RUSSIAN DÉJÀ VU

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“Someone asked whether we would send troops to Afghanistan. I think the answer is clear.”

Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, in his address on Russia’s International Activities for Russian Regions’ Development, delivered at Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU), and answers to questions from students and faculty, Vladivostok, 8 July, 2021

It is without any doubt that the withdrawal of the United States and allied troops from Afghanistan, and the subsequent rise of the Taliban in the country, caused the emergence of insecurity and instability as general trends at the regional level. This development restored a highly revisionist power with a profound influence on the social fabric of the broader peripheral states, and potentially in the economic, military and political sphere, which is governed by deep, unwavering ideological commitment to the greater ultimate cause which it serves. In this article, an attempt will be made for a first assessment, following the re-emergence of the Taliban, the core of the Islamistic Movement, as the revisionist dynamic factor with Afghanistan as the springboard, *vis-a-vis* Russia, a long-standing and powerful opponent of the United States, internationally.

While it becomes apparent that all the systemic competitors of the United States are affected by the declaration of the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Beijing and Tehran are particularly facing security challenges due to the restoration of the Taliban regime. China is mostly concerned with the disruption that might arise on the smooth function of part of the commercial route One Belt One Road (OBOR), while it has to manage the issue of the human and religious rights of the Uyghurs, the Chinese Sunni Muslims of the north-western province of Xinjiang.¹ On the other hand, Iran is concerned with the rights of Shiites in Afghanistan (11%-15% of the overall

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¹ “Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide?”, [BBC News](#), 21-06-2021.

population),² their majority being Hazars, as well as the waning Iranian influence in the country.

However, the impact of the developments on Russia lies with the reinvigoration of Kremlin's diachronic concern for the potential import of ideology or influence of the Islamic movement on the sunni Democracies of Central Asia, a geographical region closely associated with the Russian history and Kremlin's strategy over time. Central Asia has always been acting as the protective buffer zone of the Eurasian continental great power. To this end, even the slightest chance in Moscow's influence and control in the area, is perceived as a fundamental element for the alteration of the country's security. Furthermore, the fact that 7% (10,220,000)³ of Russian citizens are Muslims exacerbates Moscow's concerns in relation with developments in Afghanistan.

The Geopolitical Legacy and the Geographic Singularities of Central Asia

As it is evident from its position on the globe, Central Asia has the exceptional advantage of undisturbed access to the most important terrestrial, cultural and commercial routes in Eurasia, to and forth Russia, China, Europe and India. The morphology of the ground, with its vast steppes in its northern part, and its central position in the absolute geographical center of Eurasia, allows rapid mobility for transport on the north-south and east-west axes, constituting cultural, commercial and military lane for all major regional powers. On the other hand, for this very reason, it is a geographical area inherently vulnerable to attacks from all sides, a fact that has historically contributed to its political fragmentation (5 states and 7-8 in the wider region in modern times), permanently being overruled by the more powerful poles of power and influence of the acting supra-system, either in the form of empires, Great Powers, or Super-Powers, depending on the historical period. In addition, the eastern demographic and cultural weight of the Chinese empires has always been a constant source of soft power exercised over Central Asia. Last but not least, the Islamic religion, which was introduced by the Arab Muslims in Herat and Zaran in 642 A.C. and thereafter spread rapidly all over central Asia, constitutes a prominent element for understanding the region.

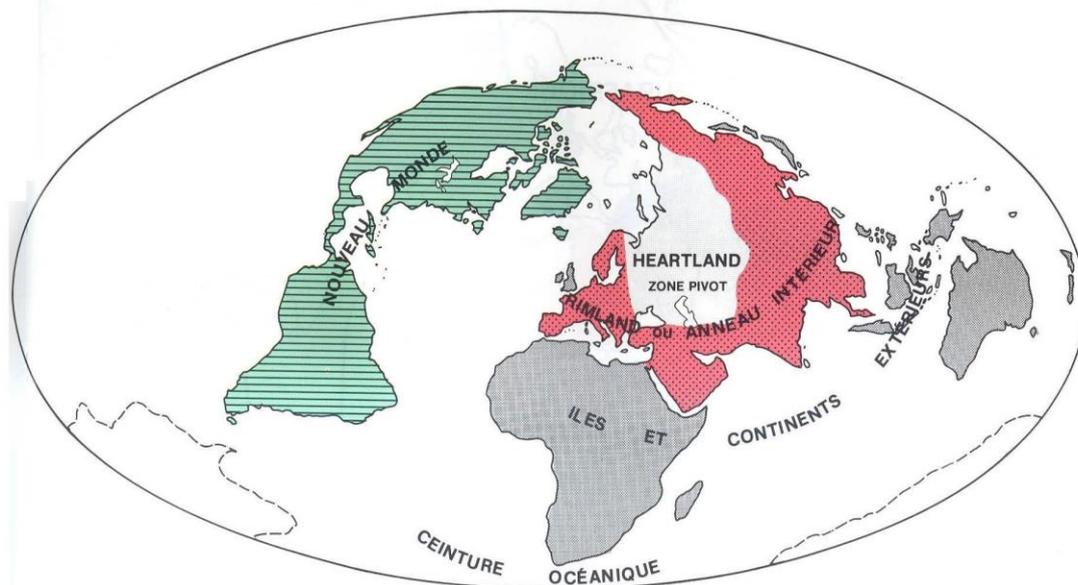
² ISIL affiliate claims responsibility for the blast at Shia mosque in Kunduz that has killed dozens. "Afghanistan: Dozens killed in suicide bombing at Kunduz mosque", *Al Jazeera*, 08-10-2021. Also in Beaumont, Peter and agencies, "Shia mosque bombing kills dozens in Afghan city of Kunduz", *The Guardian*, 08-20-2021.

³ "Russia 2017, International Religious Freedom Report", International Religious Freedom Report for 2017, *United States Department of State*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Washington D.C., 2017.



Sir Halford J. Mackinder: *"Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island. Who rules the World Island commands the World."*; Source: Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin

According to the Anglo-Saxon geopolitical theories of Sir Halford J. Mackinder⁴ and Nicholas J. Spykman⁵, which shaped the contemporary geopolitical thinking and geostrategic action, Central Asia's position within the Heartland and the fact that it is tangent with the Inner Crescent/Rimland, significantly increases its geopolitical value.



Nicholas J. Spykman: "Who controls the Rimland controls Eurasia, who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world". Source: Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

⁴ According to Mackinder basic terms in world geography that directly influence the geopolitics of power are: "Heartland" (an updated version of the "Pivot Area" of 1904) which covered the continental mass of Central Eurasia around which exists a "coastal inner marginal crescent" consisting of coastal countries of Europe and Asia; with an "insular or outer crescent" comprised of Oceania, Africa and American Continent. Furthermore, he argues that any organised state with internal cohesion dominating the Heartland (Continental Power) could easily, under certain circumstances, accumulate and increase to the maximum the traditional forms of power, the continental and naval, dominating the "World Island" (the total of the continental mass off the planet, excluding Oceania) and eventually the World. "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island. Who rules the World Island commands the World.". Mackinder presented his views in three consecutive phases: In 1904 in his article in "The Geographical Pivot of History" in *Geographical Journal*, he established the basis of his theory, and spoke of the strategic value of the "Pivot Area" in World Politics; in 1919 in his book *Democratic Ideals and Reality. A Classic Work of Geography and World Power*, he re-evaluated his model, shrinking the "Pivot Area" and renaming it "Heartland"; and finally in 1943 in his article "The Round World and the Winning of Peace" in *Foreign Affairs*, he reaffirmed the value of his theories, re-examining them in relation to the evolved military and technological means of the time.

⁵ Spykman, expanding Mackinder's theoretical analysis, offered a new perspective of the whole issue. According to Mackinder "Who controls the Rimland controls Eurasia, who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world". Indeed, during the Cold War the United States, successor to the British Empire, struggled to maintain control over the periphery of Eurasia, (Rimland for Spykman), blocking the descent of the Soviet Union which dominated the area of the "Heartland". Spykman, N., *The Geography of the Peace*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1944. See also Spykman, N., *America's Strategy in World Politics, the United States and the Balance of Power*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1944.

It is worth mentioning that Mackinder, in his comments on the geopolitical value of Central Asia, noted the following: “*Whoever controls Central Asia, has great power over the world*”⁶, while Geoffrey Sloan claims that “*Central Asia is once again the key to the security of the entire Eurasia*”.⁷ For all the aforementioned reasons, the geopolitical system of Central Asia has historically been a field of diplomatic and military competition between great powers. In this context, the theoretical model of Mackinder-Spykman continues to be the contemporary source of the strategy of containment towards the descent of the Continental Power towards warm waters.



Sir Halford J. Mackinder: “*Whoever controls Central Asia, has great power over the world*”. Geoffrey Sloan: “*Central Asia is once again the key to the security of the entire Eurasia*”. Source: CA & CC Publishing House, <https://goo.gl/kKU5QC>.

The Continental Power and the “Near Abroad”

Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the immediate establishment of five independent states in the geopolitically sensitive region of Central Asia, Moscow still enjoys the lion share in the political, economic and military control of the region. Since 1994, it has introduced in its foreign policy the principle of the “near abroad” [ближнее зарубежье]. According to the later, Russia asserts the right for itself to exert major influence, in all aspects of power, (strategic, political, military, economic, energy, cultural), within the geographical space and the decision-making procedure of the successor independent states, which emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In other words, Kremlin considers the new republics as parts of its sphere of influence⁸ and acts

⁶ CA & CC Publishing House, <https://goo.gl/kKU5QC>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Safire, William, “On language; The Near Abroad”, *The New York Times Magazine*, New York, May 1994, section 6, p. 16.

on preferential terms in its areas of interest. In the context of Russia's intentions and sensitivity regarding the implementation of the theoretical principle of "near abroad", Moscow acted directly and vigorously in the area of the former Soviet Socialist Republics, as the interventions in Georgia, in 2008, in Ukraine in 2013, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the ongoing effort to annex Belarus showcase.⁹ The Western Community, with the exception of the Ukrainian crisis, has reacted hypotonically to Russian actions, reaffirming Russia's superiority in its *de facto* privileged "near abroad" region. Consequently, a change in the degree of control over the "near abroad" would be extremely negative for Kremlin's (and, generally, the country's) status, as well as for its entire foreign policy. It could also bring about immeasurable consequences and chain reactions internationally.



Russia and the 14 new republics of "near abroad" after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. *Source: Infognomon Publications.*

⁹ It should be noted that, while the two interventions in Chechnya in 1994 and 1999, demonstrate the same Russian volition to take immediate action in order to defend its interests, these do not technically fall in scope of the actions for the defense of Russia's preferential position in the "near abroad", as Chechnya is part of the Republic of Russia.

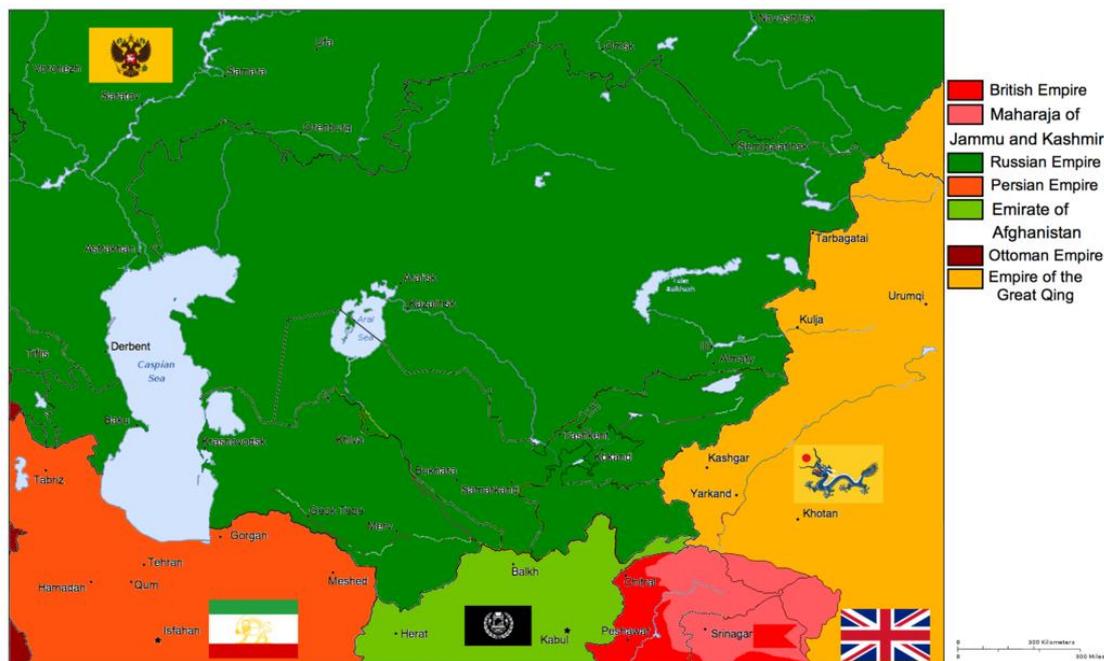


The 'Near Abroad': Source: Arsenal Research, A Beginner's Guide to the Post-Soviet "Near Abroad".

The Russian Déjà vu

Since the conquest of Kabul on August 15, 2021, a new state of affairs is being shaped in the wider region of Central and South-West Asia, as the rise of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan may, with Islam as pivot and the Islamic movement as spike, challenge the Russian supremacy in Central Asia, something that the Kremlin certainly wishes to avoid, but nevertheless, seems ready to face. However, it is demographics that mostly alarm the Russians. According to the last census that took place in 2019¹⁰, the Pashtuns constitute 39% of the country's population, the Tajiks 37%, the Hazaras 11%, the Uzbeks 8% and the Turks 2%. Provided that they all shared common religion (with the exception of Hazaras), common ethnic origin and cultural ties with the nearly 35 million Muslims of the Central Asia Democracies (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan), all bordering with Afghanistan, creates a justified concern for Kremlin that the Islamic Movement may attempt to increase its influence over them.

¹⁰ "Afghanistan in 2019. A survey of the Afghan people". Kabul, Afghanistan, The Asia Foundation, San Francisco, 2019, p.227.



The map of the end of the Great Game in 1907. Source: Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

Besides the fact that it brought back memories of the 'Great Game'¹¹ two centuries ago and the Basmachis rebellion, which Stalin tried for ten years to suppress, until mid-1930s,¹² an excellent example of this norm of thought by Kremlin is the Revisionists' approach¹³ to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979. Indeed, it was widely believed that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was a defensive move. In other words, it was perceived as Moscow's reaction to the possibility of a spill-over phenomenon, in which the Mujahidin's armed uprising against the Marxist-Leninist regime in Kabul was to be exported to the compatriot, co-religious inhabitants of the Central Asian (then) Soviet Socialist Republics.

Russia's deepest concern is evidenced by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's statement on July 8, 2021, that Moscow may resume its 40-year-old active involvement in the region, "...either if it is threatened itself or if its allies such

¹¹ The 'Great Game' for the British or 'The Tournament of Shadows' for the Russians, is about the rivalry between Tsarist Russia and Victorian England for dominance / hegemony / influence in Central Asia. What was at stake was the security of India, the key to the wealth of the British Empire, while the three Anglo-Afghan Wars reflect the British attempt to create a buffer zone of British control, between Russia and India. It ended in 1907 with the Anglo-Russian Pact of Saint Petersburg, by creating *inter alia*, a buffer state between the two empires, that of Afghanistan.

¹² For the Basmachis' rebellions see Broxup, Marie, "The Basmachi", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1983, pp. 57-81; Olcott, Martha, "The Basmachi or Freeman's Revolt in Turkestan 1918-24", *Soviet Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1981, pp. 352-369; Khan Marwat, Fazal-ur-Rahim, *The Basmachi movement in Soviet Central Asia: A study in political development*, Peshawar, Emjay Books International, 1985.

¹³ Revisionists consider the territorial "occupation" and ideological "annexation" of Eastern Europe as defensive move by Moscow, in order to avoid encirclement by the capitalist world, which, according to them, had begun the Cold War before World War II, under the fear of stopping the capitalist development of the then "free markets" of the world.

as *Tajikistan are threatened*".¹⁴ The Russian Foreign Minister added that: "*the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Armenia, has already considered responding vigorously if Tajikistan is attacked by Islamists from Afghanistan*".¹⁵ Furthermore, on 14 September, the Russian President Vladimir Putin addressing a summit of the CSTO via video link, where he referred to the issue noting that the political environment in CSTO's responsibility area, including the external state borders of its members, is "*not only unstable, but carries new, truly critical challenges and risks for the security of our countries*".¹⁶ While, he concluded: "*Right after a [...] hasty withdrawal of the troops of the United States and its allies from Afghanistan and the rise to power of the Taliban, we shared views on the dangers related to the drastically changed situation in the country at an extraordinary CSTO summit. All then approved the conclusion that amid the current environment a close cooperation between CSTO member-states is required as never before*".¹⁷ Furthermore, on 16 September 2021, in the CSTO meeting in Dushanbe, the common leadership of the organization, under Russian auspices, decided to implement a collective plan to strengthen security cooperation including the dispatch troops to Tajikistan's borders with Afghanistan.¹⁸ The General Secretary of CSTO, Stanislav Zas said that "*The organization has worked out practical collective measures to ensure Tajikistan's security in the event of a worsening of the border situation,*"¹⁹ while the Chairman of the summit, President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, explained that "*The participants in the session agreed to fortify the CSTO's southern borders and continue to plan and implement a package of measures aimed at bringing down the level of and neutralizing potential threats in the organization's space*".²⁰ The measures include common drill in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, along with reinforcing the borders of member states with Afghanistan. Having a military base in southern Tajikistan, Russia

¹⁴ "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's address on Russia's International Activities for Russian Regions' Development, delivered at Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU), and answers to questions from students and faculty", The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, mid.ru, Vladivostok, July 8, 2021. Also in «Η Ρωσία προαναγγέλλει στρατιωτική δράση κατά του Αφγανιστάν». Η Εφημερίδα των Συντακτών, Αθήνα, 08-07-2021.

¹⁵ Op. cit. The Collective Security Treaty Organization is an intergovernmental military alliance signed on 15 May 1992 by six post-Soviet states belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States (Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan). It is also referred to as the Tashkent Pact or the Tashkent Treaty, «Ташкентский договор». For additional reference, From the Treaty to the Organization (odkb-csto.org)

¹⁶ "Putin says withdrawal of Western Coalition's troops from Afghanistan was 'put midly hasty'", TASS, Russian News Agency, 16-09-2021. <https://tass.com/world/1338403>

¹⁷ Op. cit.

¹⁸ "On September 16, in Dushanbe, the Collective Security Council has discussed international and regional security problems and their impact on the security of CSTO member States", odkb-csto.org, 16-09-2021.

¹⁹ «Russia-led coalition set to deploy troops on Tajik-Afghan border», trtworld.com, 17-09-2021.

²⁰ "On September 16, in Dushanbe, the Collective Security Council has discussed international and regional security problems and their impact on the security of CSTO member States", odkb-csto.org, 16-09-2021. Also in «Russia-led coalition set to deploy troops on Tajik-Afghan border», trtworld.com, 17-09-2021.

has, openly, sent 2 tanks to Tajikistan and an array of military equipment,²¹ simply enough for demonstrating its firm political will towards the Taliban (which is not recognized as a state entity) as well as the rest of the world. As expected, the Taliban and the President of Tajikistan exchanged accusations in relation with the atrocities committed by the Taliban during their recent campaign in the Valley of Panjshir in August-September 2021, when they broke the resistance of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF)²² which still continue. This offered Moscow the opportunity to promote itself as moderator, calling on Dushanbe and Kabul to “*search for mutually acceptable solutions*” in order to deescalate the situation.²³ As the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexei Zaytsev commented on 30 September, “*We observe with concern growing tensions in Tajik-Afghan relations against the background of mutual harsh statements by the leaders of the two countries. Some reports regarding the deployment of armed forces by both sides to the common border have been published. According to information from the Taliban, tens of thousands of special forces units have been deployed in the bordering [northern] Afghan province Takhar alone*”.²⁴

All in all, at the regional level, Afghanistan is in a situation that is very common in its history. The perpetual struggle of the Muslim and tribalism traditions *versus* modernity lasts well over a century, bringing to the surface several times Islamic fanaticism, either as an inherent Afghan attribute or sometimes stimulated by a third factor. On the other hand, Moscow experiences a *déjà vu*, feeling the ripples of instability in its soft underbelly. This is what it also did four decades ago, in 1978-1979, when, for reasons closely related with the anachronistic and dysfunctional bureaucratic model of administration of the soviet apparatus [аппарат] and the antagonistic interests of the top officials of the Soviet nomenclature [номенклатура], i.e. the acting leadership triumvirate, of Yuri Andropov, Dimtri Ustinov and Andrei Gromyko, (KGB, Military, Diplomatic corps), in view of the upcoming succession of the General Secretary of the CPSU, Leonid Brezhnev, it intervened in the neighboring country. Nonetheless, in the current crisis, its administrative model is sufficient to manage the interests and security of all CSTO countries, without mass mobilization and mass armed conflicts. Elements such as Putin’s personal weighted, but fully functional leadership, the excellent reflects of the state’s diplomacy, the existence of the CSTO and additional use of the Shanghai Cooperation Agreement (SCA), the modern Russian military technology, the international public opinion, but also the accumulated experience in the Central Asian region, guarantee a successful management of the issue.

²¹ Marrow, Alexander (reporting), “Russia sends armoured vehicles, military equipment to Tajikistan”, Reuters Agency, 11-09-2021. Also in «Τεθωρακισμένα στέλνει η Ρωσία στο Τατζικιστάν», Η Εφημερίδα των Συντακτών, 07-09-2021.

²² NRF consists of Tajik Afghans, under the leadership of party founder Ahmad Massoud, older son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, notorious political and military leader against the Soviets in the 1980s, known as the Lion of Panjshir.

²³ Shelton, Jon, «Russia says Tajiks, Afghans amassing troops at shared border, urges solution», Deutsche Welle, 30-09-2021.

²⁴ «Η Μόσχα καλεί σε ήρεμη διευθέτηση της κατάστασης στα σύνορα Αφγανιστάν, Τατζικιστάν», CNN.gr, 30-09-2021.

With regards to the acting supra-system and the international poles of power, it is noteworthy that three of them are also regional actors, a fact that increases the significance of the developments. It is clear that the initiative of the United States to essentially allow the return of the Taliban to power brings Moscow and Beijing closer to each other in the Central Asian region, and given the common opponent, namely the Taliban Islamist Movement, their coordination in SCA is a *sine qua non* condition. In the same vain, the course of events could also strengthen Iranian-Russian relations further, as Moscow and Tehran are both affected by the rise of the Taliban and the creation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. It is therefore becoming evident that the current Afghanistan crisis enhances further the emerging Moscow-Beijing-Tehran front *vis-a-vis* the United States and its Western allies.

From a realist point of view, Moscow will always be actively interested in developments in Afghanistan and the wider region of Central Asia because, on the one hand, it is one of the fastest routes to reach the warm waters and, on the other hand, it could become a geo-cultural spear that could fatally hurt it.