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LIVING WITH THE TALIBAN: THE NEED FOR A CENTRAL EURASIA POLICY

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The Taliban movement has recently induced a major defeat on the opposition northern alliance, thereby securing its position as the dominant military and political force in the country. This has caused a reshuffling in regional politics, as the recent Russo-Indian strategic partnership shows.

Foreign powers have meddled in Afghanistan's affairs for decades if not centuries, the most blatant example being the British-Russian 'great game' for the control of Afghanistan in the nineteenth century. More recently, the 1979 Soviet intervention carried Afghanistan to the forefront of world politics. Beyond complicating the domestic politics of Afghanistan, foreign interventions have constantly disrupted the fragile ethnic, religious and social balance of the country. This pattern persisted in the aftermath of the Soviet troop

withdrawal in 1989. With the era of bipolar confrontation relegated to history, the struggle for influence in and around Afghanistan intensified, and the number of involved actors multiplied. Among the most active players was Pakistan, mindful of the 1970s and 1980s when the Afghani regime was closely allied with its arch-rival India, and had recurring territorial claims on Pakistan's northern territories. The emergence of a vigorous religious students' movement among Afghan refugees in Pakistan was hence a blessing that provided Islamabad with the opportunity to help install a friendly regime in Kabul—a crucial objective in the country's endeavor to achieve 'strategic depth'.

Yet other powers saw the situation in a different light. The advances of the Taliban, coupled with their zealous as well as peculiar interpretation of Islam, created shockwaves around the

region. Fearful of the regional implications of a decisive Taliban victory, a host of governments extended financial, diplomatic and military support to the 'northern alliance' led by the master strategist Ahmad Shah Masoud. These included all Central Asian states with the exception of Turkmenistan, as well as Russia, Iran, Turkey, and India. Still other countries remained weary of the Taliban, but stayed short of involving themselves in the struggle. Most importantly, the United States and China remained on the sidelines of the conflict—in America's case, with obvious difficulties in formulating a coherent policy toward Afghanistan and the region in general. China's approach was more pragmatic, and depended on a long-term strategy of increasing its influence in the region.

Afghanistan and the wider Central Eurasia is a white spot on

the global geopolitical map. Whereas alignments in neighboring regions, such as the Caucasus or Southeast Asia, are fairly established and stable, the relationships between and among great powers in Central Eurasia contrive into a contradictory but very real web of interests. It is an area where alliances meet, evolve and dissolve. It is surrounded by the major existing and emerging power centers on the Eurasian continent—for example, nuclear powers Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and—whether already now or in the near future—Iran. Geography alone gives the region strategic value, yet it has immensely more to offer: the oil and gas resources of the Caspian area being the most prominent example. Hence the NATO-Russia rivalry, US-Iranian antagonism, and the Sino-Indo-Pakistani triangle all influence the area—but are also increasingly influenced by it. To name only one example, the US and Russia have increasingly come

to cooperate on Afghanistan and Central Asia, seeing radical Islam and growing Chinese influence as reason enough to bury the hatchet, be it only temporarily and confined to this region of the world.

In this context, the recent Taliban victories have dealt a major blow to the policy of confrontation pursued chiefly by Russia, Iran and India but entertained by more faraway actors like the US, whose Afghanistan policy has been conditioned by one sole factor: Usama Bin Laden. Contrary to expert predictions, the harsh and uncompromising character of the Taliban regime does not seem to precipitate its imminent downfall—perhaps very much as despite their strong Pakistani backing, the Taliban are correctly perceived as an internal Afghan force and not a foreign stooge. The recent victories show that the Taliban are in Afghanistan to stay. There is no credible threat to their control of the country in the short term, and whether interested powers like it or

not, no conceivable alternative has a better prospect of stabilizing war-weary Afghanistan. Awareness of this reality is growing, and major actors—notably Russia—are busy reformulating their policies, as last week's rekindling of the Russo-Indian axis shows. Meanwhile, the US keeps betraying its lack of a long-term strategy in this region, whose importance to Eurasian security will not recede. Reactive and ad hoc tactical measures may suffice in other areas of the world where US power is predominant. But given its geographic distance, the US is only one among players in the Eurasian steppes. The need to formulate a strategic vision, with a full understanding of the internal riddles and external ramifications of Central Eurasian politics, is long overdue.

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