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## **THE FALL OF KABUL WHAT DOES THIS SITUATION MEAN FOR CENTRAL ASIAN STATES AND EUROPEAN UNION?**

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### **Abstract**

Just days after the withdrawal of US troops, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. Inevitably, this situation will affect the nations of the Central Asian region, which are already suffering from authoritarian regimes and various forms of hybrid threats, including terrorism, separatism, extremism, drug trafficking and cross-border organized crime. In the same vein, there is a state of uncertainty regarding the ramifications of this situation, which could lead to a deterioration of the security climate in Europe. As the level of hybrid activity has increased substantially in recent years and the expected challenges are cross-border in nature, they require special attention from the international community. Therefore, this paper will bring an explanatory and predictive note in relation to the situation in Afghanistan and the new threats, that foreshadow in the short and medium term in Central Asia and Europe.

*Keywords: European Union, Central Asia, Hybrid Threats, Security, Cooperation.*

### **1. Introduction**

It is not difficult to see that, along with the withdrawal of US troops, the erosion of the security environment and stability in Afghanistan has accelerated, and the consequences of this event will sooner or later affect Central Asia and Europe.

The Caspian region is challenged by a wide variety of political, socio-economic and military threats, which include inter alia armed conflicts, inter-ethnic and confessional tensions, militant separatism, international terrorism, illegal arms and drugs trade.

The security of the region is also affected by the intensifying strategic competition among major foreign powers over establishing their political and economic influence in regional affairs.

Therefore, on the fertile ground created by the crisis in Afghanistan, the questions that arise concern the risks, threats, and vulnerabilities in the region.

How can the premises be created, for regional powers to justify an increased military presence in the Central Asian region? How will new risks, threats and vulnerabilities be exploited by different actors?

How can the new risks, threats and vulnerabilities affect societies in Central Asia and Europe? - with an emphasis on language policies, the emergence of ethnic enclaves and nationalist currents.

What tactical and strategic methods could be used, to intensify the military presence in the area?

It's no secret that such tactics were used successfully in 2014, when, under the pretext of protecting Russian-speaking minorities from the threat of extremism and government aggression, the Russian Federation deployed troops on Ukrainian territory in order to occupy the Crimean Peninsula. Further, the pro-Russian ethnic groups orchestrated a "referendum", and under the umbrella of "popular will", declared the independence of the Crimean-Peninsula, which was later annexed to the Russian Federation.



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The answer to these questions will be integrated in the form of a qualitative analysis and will include methods of deductive and inductive argumentation designed to highlight and explain the risks, the threats and vulnerabilities, arising from the crisis in Afghanistan.

## **2. Europe's Connections with Central Asia and Security Implications**

Regarding the risk, threat and vulnerability factors that the crisis in Afghanistan has caused for Central Asia and Europe, it should be noted that most of them have pre-existed in various forms since the Soviet Union.

Therefore, it is expected that, under the new challenges, the Russian Federation will take advantage and will create favorable conditions designed to influence the new regional cohesion policies.

This special situation raises concerns about the prospects for cooperation between the European Union and the Central Asian states, and these issues, have been expressed in the European Union Strategy for Central Asia.

On the one hand, through the strategy for Central Asia, the European Union aims to eliminate its dependence on oil and gas imports from Russia.

On the other hand, the Central Asian states are equally advantaged by the strategy of the European Union, through various opportunities for economic, trade and security cooperation with Western countries.

The EU Strategy for Central Asia currently covers seven main areas: human rights and the rule of law, good governance and democratization, youth and education, economic development, energy and transport, environmental protection, countering common threats and intercultural dialogue.

However, none of the initiatives mentioned above managed to break down the numerous trade barriers that existed between states.

Although the Strategy was reviewed four times in 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2015, 2019, the EU's top priorities for the region remained constant.

On 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2017, the EU and its Member States reaffirmed their commitment to developing a strong and durable relationship, based on joint ownership and aimed at fostering peaceful, prosperous, sustainable and stable socio-economic development of the Central Asian region, in line with the EU Global Strategy and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Article 5 asserts that *“The Council recognizes the security challenges faced by Central Asian countries and stresses the need to strengthen dialogue and cooperation on security challenges such as prevention of violent extremism (including addressing radicalization, the issue of foreign fighters and counter-terrorism, with an increased focus on prevention. [...]”*

The Council recognizes the importance of effective border control in ensuring the facilitation of cross-border trade, the fight against illegal trafficking of drugs, persons and goods and for managing migration flows, and is determined to continue its support to strengthening cooperation among Central Asian countries on their border management.

Hence, the EU recognizes the importance of keeping the area safe and peaceful, but not much progress has been done in recent years to implement the measures stated above.[1]

Finally, several EU Member States are funding the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARRIC), which was created to coordinate joint actions for countering illicit drug-trafficking.

European countries also participate in the Central Asia Border Security Initiative (CABSI), a platform for dialogue and exchange between local actors and international donors.[2]



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A renewed EU strategy towards Central Asia was adopted in 2019, which was synchronized with the adoption of the multiannual development assistance budget for 2020-2027.

In its strategies, the European Union is committed to a much more active presence in the Central Asian region and takes into account the involvement of Russia and China in the area.

The size of the allocated funds, as well as, the numerous cooperation programs with the states in the area, underline the importance of these commitments.[3]

The general objectives of the regional development programs aim to increase cooperation in the fields of energy, environment, water and socio-economic development.

There are also programs, designed to strengthen cross-border cooperation through integrated border management and joint fight against drug trafficking, giving a new impetus to *the Joint Plan Action for the Implementation of the United Nations Global Counter Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia, the Border Management Program in Central Asia (BOMCA) and the Central Asia Drug Action Program (CADAP)*.

Intergovernmental cooperation and efficient border management have always been the central interests for EU policy in the Central Asia region, but despite a long period of dialog and cooperation, the breakthrough has been somewhat modest.

Even if now the EU is committed to a more involved policy in the region, it lacks the means and influence to actually implement those plans.

The former Secretary General of NATO, Lord Robertson, stated that: “Europe cannot be fully secure or realize its own potential, if the Central Asian countries are left out of the equation.”[4]

Equally important in this context is the ability of policy makers to identify common ground and means for improving coordination between EU and US strategies in the Central Asia region.

## **2.1 The emergence of insecurity factors for Central Asian countries**

Despite European Union programs aimed at strengthening the democracy and security of Central Asian states, there are concerns that, in one way or another, amid the new crisis, *the region's dependence on the Russian Federation will increase*.

Hence, the recognition of the Taliban regime by the Russian Federation requires special attention from the international community.

On the one hand, the Russian presence in the area would bring a drop of stability, through new cooperation agreements with newly installed Taliban regime.

These actions will cause unmistakably interdependencies and isolationist policies in the region.

On the other hand, the danger of insurgency and interethnic tensions, remains active and may lead to an increase in "Soviet sentiment", which calls for military intervention to protect Russian-speaking communities in Central Asia, followed by annexations of territories and / or various economic and military agreements with the Russian Federation.

The depth of the subject lies in the fact that, the politicization of ethnicity and language issues can become a direct attack on the sovereignty and territorial inviolability of a state.

The psychological component of hybrid warfare was tested in Ukraine and raises questions on the capabilities of Central Asian governments to counterbalance this phenomenon. How will protect their citizens, critical infrastructure and sensitive information from disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks and informational aggressions?

The geopolitical unpredictability of the “Russian World” concept and the thesis about “protection of fellow countrymen”, have created some fear in Central Asian region regarding the destabilization and growing militaristic sentiments in certain population groups, fueled by fake news from social media.



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As part of the psychological warfare, the Russian federation seeks to establish new, or to encourage transformation of existing ethno-confessional public movements and organizations in Central Asia.

A clear example of these tactics could be seen in Ukraine, where the need and importance of establishing policies to ensure government control over interethnic relations and language policies was highlighted, but unfortunately the lack of such policies has turned into violent confrontations.

Central Asian states, which have significant Russian ethnic communities (especially Kazakhstan), must also consider the risks posed by the coexistence of several national identities in a state.

The chaos in Ukraine occurred when the government failed to shape a domestic policy, targeting the consolidation of the single-nation idea and single-state ideology.

Therefore, the events in Crimea and then, in Donetsk and Lughansk regions, showed the effectiveness of Russia’s strategy regarding symmetrical and artificial joining of “divided people.” Subsequently, the fragmentation of Ukrainian territory set a precedent, that can be repeated in Central Asia given the numerous existing ethnic enclaves and various territorial claims.

In this context, the governments of Central Asia must pay more attention to Russia’s plans, which continuously simplify the procedures for granting citizenship to persons born in the Soviet Union, or descendants of Russian-speaking Soviet citizens.

The existence of ethnic communities could potentially be used as justification of military intervention.

Hence, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, should raise awareness for Central Asian governments regarding the importance of protecting their borders against third-party military action, especially in light of existing enclaves, diverse ethnic environments and reciprocal territorial claims.

On the other side, Russian Federation, has been accelerating the expansion of its military presence in Central Asia and signed agreements with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, thus extending the presence of its military bases in those countries until 2042 and 2032.

However, Russia doesn’t have as much influence in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, as it has in the other three other Central Asian states.(these 2 countries have managed to avoid Moscow’s multilateral treaties and cooperation organizations).

Nevertheless, at a bilateral level, Russian-Uzbek and Russian-Turkmen economic relations remain close knit.

The reciprocal measures taken by the West and Russia to reduce mutual trade in the principal commodities, such as oil and gas have had long-reaching effects for the Central Asian states, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as the major exporters of fuel.

Kazakhstan’s economy has been further affected by the Ukrainian crisis, as trade has shrunk by more than 40 % during the post-Crimea period.

Russian factories’ demand for raw materials from the Central Asian region has been declining, since for production, those factories heavily depend on cooperation with industrial companies in Ukraine.

The events in Ukraine affected also the small and medium-sized businesses in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries that trade with Ukraine, as well as serious disruption for the European trade and investment.

Logistics and supply chains have changed significantly and have narrowed the range of goods and services, making trade dependent on the current geopolitical situation.[5]

Moreover, Russia’s economy has lost its appeal to the countries of the Central Asian region due to the prolonged recession and sanctions imposed by the international community.



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On the same note, the Covid-19 health crisis, as well as the devaluation of the Russian ruble and the stagnation of the economy, have severely affected the official and clandestine labor flows, which become increasingly complicated.

In this regard, it should also be noted that remittances made by migrants working in Russia to their countries of origin have decreased considerably with the economic isolation of Russia.

All these factors have determined the migrants to prefer Turkey or Europe, as a final destination!

## **2.2 Soft Generators of Insecurities in Central Asia**

The Eurasian Economic Union was created as a counterweight and is Russia's mirrored version of the European Union, the first regional organization since the fall of the Soviet Union, to reach a deep level of integration (single market and common foreign trade tariffs).

The Eurasian Economic Union is useful for Russia not because of any purported economic advantages, but because of the geopolitical leverage it gains.

Russia provides the other member states with various incentives, free trade and movement, and in exchange they gain a political ally.

Thus, this regional organization often works as a redistribution mechanism mainly driven by political consideration, in which the most powerful member (in this case Russia) provides side-payments or other forms of incentives or facilitations to weaker states in exchange for their participation in a geopolitical coalition.

Therefore, it can be appreciated that the EAEU has a different purpose, that of maintaining Russia's influence in post-Soviet Eurasia, and thus, Russia perceives this regional organization as a necessary accessory of a Great Power in the modern world.

The next step for Russia would be to integrate all five Central Asian countries into the Eurasian Economic Union.

Russia, has strong links to the region both politically and economically, but is no longer the main investor and trading partner, losing that position to China.

All these actions indicate that, Russia's primary interest is to regain control, not cooperation and regional development.

Nevertheless, Russian Federation still remains the most important actor in regard to security in the region and de facto leader of Collective Security Treaty Organization (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are not part of the treaty).[6]

In this context, the EU and NATO must adapt their policies and focus their efforts on new alternative development opportunities for Central Asian countries, so that policymakers in this region understand that Eurasian integration and partnership with Russia are not the only options available.

However, the Russian Federation should not be disregarded and the foreign policy of the Central Asian states can be shaped, only by the ability of the Western political establishment, to manage a balanced long-term relationship with Moscow.

## **2.3 Rise of China as Economic and Security Player in Central Asia**

Central Asia boasts one of the largest oil and gas reserves in the world and thus, for China's ever-expanding economy, it represents an important untapped potential.



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The energy infrastructure in Central Asian region was developed during the Soviet Union days, but is not yet completely modernized and able to keep up with China's increased demands for imports.

Today, China has become the main trading partner and investor in the Central Asian region and is the most significant external player from an economic point of view, followed by Russia the EU, the US, Japan and Turkey.

As China is dependent on crude oil and gas imports from the Central Asian region, it has a growing interest and has various means to promote regional cooperation and ensure that the area is free of conflicts.[7]

Kazakhstan is the most important oil supplier for China and between the two countries runs the longest gas pipeline in the world, measuring 2300 km.

During the Beijing Silk Road Forum, that was hosted in May 2017 by the Chinese government, all of the Central Asian states have expressed their interest in joining the initiative, as China holds a great importance for their economies.

For example, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed the agreement to take part in the Belt and Road Initiative and in return have received generous sums for various infrastructure projects.

China has invested in the region and has made offers to invest massively in the following years if, in return the Central Asian countries take measures to reform their economies and cooperate between them.

Before the Belt and Road initiative, China put forward the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a platform for cooperation in the field of security which has allowed China to consolidate its influence in the region without antagonizing Russia.

More to the point, China tried to go beyond the initial scope of the organization, that of traditional security dialog and introduce an economic dimension.[8]

Beijing is seeking to expand roads and railway lines to export Chinese goods not only to Central Asia, but also to Europe. [9]

As well, China has been building up its economic presence in Afghanistan – a part of what has been called “Greater Central Asia”. It actually plays a leading role in Afghanistan's economy, and in expanding its influence in Afghanistan, it will probably use Pakistan's support.

Due to economic interests, the withdrawal of the Americans from Afghanistan is a huge advantage for China, which along with Russia recognized the Taliban regime.

Additionally, it should be noted that western Afghanistan, heavily depends on energy imports from Turkmenistan.

So, Ashgabat and Beijing may have a common interest in building a gas and oil pipeline from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan to Pakistan, potentially also to handle oil and gas resources of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

In this context, European Union policymakers need to consider the potential of natural resources held by Central Asian states and strengthen cooperative relations with all countries in the region in order to shape a long-term perspective on ensuring energy security for the European Union.

Focusing only on blocking China's projects in the European Union and the lack of a global strategic vision, produces devastating long-term effects.

If China, by importing massive amounts of resources, manages to monopolize the export of oil and gas from Central Asia, then it may end up controlling stock prices and the geo-economic situation in the entire region.



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Therefore, in order to ensure energy security, some countries in the European Community could end up accepting various compromises, which would benefit the Russian Federation and / or China and jeopardize the homogeneity of the European Union.

More to the point, China has been cooperating ever more actively with the Central Asian countries in recent years within the framework of the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS).

The SCO regularly holds joint anti-terror military drills called the “Peace Mission,” to intimidate terrorists in the region.

Law-enforcement agencies are also strengthening bilateral practical cooperation in the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking.

For example, China and Kyrgyzstan have created a mechanism of joint border cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

Also, China invests in different training programs for officers from central Asian countries, all in an effort to ensure security in the region.

On the same note, China constantly renders military assistance to Central Asian countries. For example, it delivers tents, motor vehicles, computers, office equipment and various military supplies to Central Asian states.

China through all this different cooperation programs and investment initiatives tries to build multidimensional links with Central Asian countries, specifically, in the sphere of energy, infrastructure and minerals production, to ensure long-term stability in the region.

It is of note that, to date, China has only used soft power tools to try and influence its partner countries and there are well-established agreements for an institutional transfer between China and the Central Asian countries.

These were agreed in the form of financial incentives, the construction of infrastructure and various major development programs for commercial and loan facilities, all in an attempt to build loyalty.

With this approach, China still adheres to its foreign policy which is vastly different from that of Western countries and in total opposition with the Russian one.

## **2.4 Cross-border security implications**

The new Taliban regime, which settled just few days after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, brings with it a series of hybrid risks and threats to the European Union and Central Asian countries.

Besides illegal migration, this crisis can bring in, some domestic terrorism and extremism, as well as various viral strains, modified and resistant to existing vaccines that can generate new health crises, perhaps more dangerous than Covid-19.

Increasing drug trafficking is also a problem that needs special attention, as it can destabilize many social sectors in Central Asian countries and in the European Union as well.

In Central Asia, these problems, will be added to existing problems such as the local phenomenon of radicalization and drug trafficking, which is largely a business state sponsored and accepted by high-level officials and secret services.

Regarding narcotics issue, Afghanistan produces over 80% of the world's heroin, which is delivered to foreign markets through Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries.

Unfortunately, the effects of Afghan drug trafficking and related organized crime have amplified in society, leading to an increase in HIV illnesses and drug-related crime in Afghanistan and Central Asian countries.



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In the light of this evidence, warnings should be raised at European Commission level about new types of risks that threaten social security of the entire European Community.

Central Asia and the Caucasus have traditionally been a key link in the transportation of opium and heroin, harvested and produced in Afghanistan, to Russia and Western markets. Heroin and opium from Afghanistan currently account for 87% of world production per year. Today, it is estimated that 65% of opiates produced in Afghanistan circulate in the Central Asian transport corridor.[10]

If the drug trade continues to expand uncontrollably and fund the work of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, local communities will be destroyed, along with all efforts to build trust and any chance of successful cooperation with neighboring countries and the European Union.

It is also important to note that poppy cultivation will have long-term effects on national health, education and social welfare, which in turn will negatively affect legitimate long-term economic growth.

Most opium processing takes place in northern Afghanistan, making large quantities available in the vicinity of Central Asian states.

Known heroin labs in Kunduz province and elsewhere in the north, as well as increased heroin seizures, along with a reduction in opium seizures, indicate that the main volume of drugs moving to Central Asia is in the form of heroin.

In recent years, the number of drug users in Central Asia has risen alarmingly, and even though Central Asia has not seen an addiction epidemic like in Russia, heroin addiction levels are rising exponentially, becoming a national security issue.

This has created a severe corruption problem across the region at all levels, especially among the government structures on the borders of Central Asian countries, which are closely linked to drug trafficking, as low-paid government officials in law enforcement are routinely bribed by smugglers to look the other way.

More than that, there is sufficient evidence that high-level government officials have been involved in drug trafficking in Central Asia, raising the question of whether there has been a progressive and systematic criminal infiltration into state agencies.

Moreover, the insurgent elements in the Central Asian area, are closely linked to drug trafficking, further amplifying the issue of threats to the security of the region and Europe as well.

It is also estimated that in Central Asian countries, the combination of organized crime with terrorism can give rise to - the lethal product of strategic crime - which aims to usurp political power.

In other words, terrorist groups are generally strongly ideologically motivated to use extreme violence for a cause considered sacred, in order to punish unbelievers, while organized crime aims, first of all, to occupy as large a segment of the illicit or licit markets of goods or services as possible, such as Mexican Drug Cartels, without being animated to promote in any way their own ideology but willing to promote fear and terror.

Even if some call them, political goals, and others economic ones, their common denominator is the desire to obtain funds as soon as possible to allow them to ensure the fluency of actions.

It is no secret that terrorist organizations frequently use criminal groups to obtain weapons, ammunition or material resources, or they use methods specific to criminal groups such as human trafficking, smuggled goods, weapons, radioactive substances.

While experts fail to reach a consensus on defining the concepts of terrorism, organized crime, mafia, or corruption, which can be defined from various angles and experiences, *organized*



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*crime structures have often demonstrated the ability to collaborate with terrorist groups.* (Mincheva, Gurr, 2008)

Moreover, these structures prove more and more easy in adapting to the changes of situations and conditions, orienting very quickly towards the economic space, that ensures them the biggest gains and concrete possibilities of penetration in the social and legal institutions.

Thus, it can be appreciated that, in addition to the distinct threats posed by terrorism and organized crime, to the security of Central Asian states and European Union countries, new risk factors are added, resulting from the interference of these two phenomena and represented by:

- ***the financial means obtained by terrorist groups from activities specific to organized crime, may allow the development of their own organizational and operational support capabilities similar to Mexican Drug Cartels, but with ideologic component;***
- ***the emergence of conflicts of interest, through the involvement of terrorism in European organized crime where both parties can resort to extremely violent ways to resolve them;***
- ***the prospect of establishing and consolidating, on the territory of European Union, of new hybrid threat vectors, resulting from the convergence of organized crime structures with the international terrorist phenomenon.***

### **3. Conclusions**

With the Taliban coming to power just few days after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, inflation is expected to rise throughout the Central Asian region.

At the same time, it is very likely that hybrid threats associated with terrorism and organized crime activities such as arms trafficking, drug trafficking, corruption, clandestine migration and various forms of local or regional epidemics to intensify.

Anti-globalization trends will emerge in the Central Asian region in favor of nationalist and protectionist approaches. Such phenomenon can increase vulnerabilities in both Europe and Central Asia, where cooperation is imperative to counter the security risks associated with hybrid threats.

Thus, it is foreseen that against the background of the sanitary crisis and security issues from Afghanistan, the political authoritarianism in excess, will rise in Central Asian region.

This crisis will provide acceptable pretexts for Central Asian authoritarian leaders to eliminate their opposition, as well as, to close borders and to reject accusations based on national security issues.

In the same context, messages and attitudes of extremist and xenophobic type will emerge to blame ethnic, professional, or social categories.

As a result, it is likely that in Central Asian region, the polarization of society and the gaps widening between different socio-demographic, ethnic and professional categories, to be an important challenge for the coming years.

Competition and not cooperation will intensify amid this crisis and cooperation will have more bilateral than multilateral values.

National protectionism in Central Asia could lead to an era of more isolationism and stronger feelings of sovereignty.

Most likely these attitudes will continue to expand in Central Asia and Europe also, and thus, through more nationalism and more bilateral than multilateral negotiations, the public policies characteristic of each country, will determine the way in which the regional and international system will be reformulated.



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Due to the involvement of the Russian Federation and China, the crisis in Afghanistan is becoming a game changer, that may lead to the emergence of a new eastern economic-military bloc, that mirrors the the NATO and EU model.

The European Community will be affected also by the crisis from Afghanistan and related hybrid threats.

It is likely that migration pressure will increase in Europe and Russia, due to the fact that populations will want to flee from Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, less able to withstand the security crisis and its consequences, including food shortages, sanitary and economic issues.

Most likely in the short and medium term, the Central Asian region will witness a situation of socio-economic instability.

In the most aggressive scenario, social instability can turn into military instability, which would attract the involvement of other states.

The exaltation of geo-technological competition between the US and China will accelerate the evolution towards a technological bipolarity globally and Central Asia or European Union are no except.[11]

This aspect will be determined by the promotion and dissemination of technological standards (5G, quantum processing, biotechnologies) of associated products and regulations on their use for the benefit of the citizens and the authorities.

This phenomenon will be manifested by imposing conditions in political relations with other states, or by assuming their own standards and technologies, respectively by excluding competing technologies from the market.

This will also generate competition for European and Central Asian markets in order to influence major decisions on technological standards.

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