
Russia's Approach to Afghanistan Following the Taliban Takeover

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 724
November 2021

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The key words to describe Russia's immediate reaction to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 are pragmatic, relatively calm, and restrained. While the Kremlin called for recognition of the reality of the Taliban's control of the country, the Russian embassy in Kabul expressed early readiness to interact with the new de facto authorities. However, Russia, like most other states, has been in no haste to formally recognize the Taliban or even [remove](#) it from its list of terrorist organizations. Moscow has [conditioned](#) these steps on the Taliban's behavior in order to retain a few direct, diplomatic sources of leverage over the new Afghan authorities who seek international legitimacy, particularly from non-Western permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Russia's approach to Afghanistan under the Taliban will be shaped by the new authorities' ability to ensure the basic functionality of the state and significantly reduce violence. While there are grounds for skepticism about any fast or major progress on the formation of an inclusive government or drug control issues, antiterrorism has emerged as the main issue on which the Taliban can be induced to more readily accommodate Russian and broader international concerns. Overall, Moscow has a strong preference for collective actions taken in cooperation with regional powers on Afghanistan. And despite the fact that pre-existing threats from Afghanistan have been compounded by the potential intensification of the intra-Afghan strife in the country's north as well as new Tajikistan-Afghanistan tensions, dealing with the "Afghan problem" may very well be a win-win situation for Russia and Central Asia.

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Russia's Evolving Approach Toward the Taliban

The Taliban's role has significantly evolved since its first rule in Afghanistan. It was their activities in the 1990s that served as a rationale for their [inclusion](#) on Russia's list of terrorist groups in 2003. Back then, a Supreme Court decision noted two Russia-related issues: the hijacking of a Russian plane by the Taliban in 1995 (with hostages taken) and its unspecified links to Chechen insurgents. It also made a vague reference to the Taliban's support of Islamist movements seeking to overthrow certain Central Asian governments.² Since then, Russia has kept the Taliban on its terrorist list as one of few antiterrorist levers in relation to Afghanistan. It has also been a way for Moscow to accommodate the concerns of its Central Asian allies and to use it as an external threat to justify the role of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Central Asia.

In the 2010s, Russia's antiterrorism concerns about Afghanistan gradually shifted to two other sources of risk, none of which were directly Taliban-related. The main challenge came when and where these two risks overlapped in northern Afghanistan. One risk was posed by the long-time formation of fragmented Islamist militant milieu in the Afghan north, with the heavy presence of exiled Central Asian militants. The other risk stems from the more recent phenomenon of the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan. In northern Afghanistan, ISIS elements included some militants from ISIS's formal Afghan branch (ISIS-Khorasan or ISIS-K) who relocated there from the group's main base in the east. However, the ISIS presence in the north has been mainly composed of local, self-identified ISIS elements that were joined later by some foreign terrorist fighters (of Central Asian origin) moving from Syria and Iraq. While the overall potential for a spill-over of violent Islamism into Central Asia has not been high and, taken separately, various threats have remained relatively limited, the overlap of threats poses genuine security issues for Central Asian states and, by extension, Russia.

From the outset, the Taliban fell out with ISIS-K, seeing it as a radical rival, engaging it militarily, and capitalizing on this politically by presenting itself as an indigenous, Afghan-centered force and a lesser threat than ISIS. This led to some international reassessments of the Taliban, including by Russia. The Taliban's anti-ISIS-K move was one of the main reasons behind Russia's initial decision to establish communication channels with the Taliban in the mid-2010s. Several years later, those relations [evolved](#) into inviting a Taliban delegation to attend Moscow-initiated negotiations, namely the regional peace consultation format and the intra-Afghan dialogue. These sessions and connections ultimately paid off once the movement returned to power in August 2021, making the transition "[relatively comfortable](#)" for Russia.

² Supreme Court of the Russian Federation Ruling No. N ГКПД 03-116, February 14, 2003.

Russian Policy and Concerns After the Taliban Takeover

The abrupt withdrawal of the remaining Western forces from Afghanistan and the swift Taliban takeover led to a decline in combat violence across the country but sharply raised the degree of overall uncertainty. What concerned Russia the most was not so much the U.S. withdrawal, which was pending and imminent, but the potential failure of the new authorities to ensure basic order and state functionality. For Moscow, the main challenge was less about dealing with the Taliban or with an Islamist government as such, but more about the prospect of no functional central authority and further destabilization, which could spill across borders, especially to Central Asia. These risks have been aggravated by the uncontrolled spread of relatively modern, abandoned arms.

That regional stability remains Russia's uncontested priority in relation to Afghanistan is not in question. The question is whether it is "stability at any price," i.e., the price of a second Afghan Emirate. For the time being, Russia has accepted the Taliban as an interim caretaker government. In theory, Moscow could live with an Islamist-dominated regime anywhere, especially if the latter gradually moderates in the direction of a Sunni-dominated analog of fundamentalist Iran. In practice, however, Moscow's approach toward the Taliban being in power is hardly finalized—it is pragmatic and evolving. Russia's view is shaped by two basic conditions for the Taliban: ensure core functionality of the state and significantly reduce violence. It is out of Moscow's firm belief that the only way to meet these two conditions over the long term for any Afghan authorities is to form an inclusive coalition government—that Russia keeps advocating for the need for such a government.

In a broad sense, Russia's main concerns vis-à-vis Afghanistan have been, and remain, terrorism and narcotics. To the extent the new Afghan authorities could extend state control into the country's gray areas, rein in militant-terrorist groups, and [remove](#) a couple of thousand ISIS militants in the Afghan north, it would be a positive development for Moscow. On this, Russia is ready to give the Taliban some leeway. For example, Russia's deputy foreign minister for antiterrorism [noted](#) that the new Afghan authorities have "still to [formulate](#) their counterterrorism policies" and that Moscow is still evaluating any of its potential connections to radical groups such as al-Qaeda. Still, Moscow's message has been clear and political in nature: the ball is now on the side of the Taliban as they strive for international legitimization.

However, at the early stage of their rule, the Taliban are no less interested in consolidating their power than in international legitimacy. This makes any fast or substantive progress on an inclusive coalition government unlikely at this point. The overwhelmingly Pashtu government formed by the Taliban in the Fall of 2021 involves five Tajiks and Uzbeks in high positions (vice-premier, head of general staff, and three ministers; two are former shadow provincial governors). The Taliban may somewhat

increase these numbers, but any real progress on this issue could only result from long and hard political trade-offs, especially with the international community, as half of the members of the Taliban government remain under UN sanctions.

Against this backdrop, the easier way for the Taliban to make up for the lack of substantive progress in creating an inclusive government (as well as on human and minority rights issues) is to step up their anti-ISIS efforts. So far, they have executed ISIS-K leader Abu Umar Khorasani when he was in prison (but he had been detained by the previous government in 2020).³ They have declared an anti-ISIS operation in October 2021, that also involved their elite Badr-313 brigade, including in the ISIS-K original hotbed in Nangarhar. The Taliban have also reportedly [forced](#) Uyghur militants away from the border with China in Badakhshan in an apparent effort to influence Beijing toward their side. Going beyond such actions would imply that the Taliban are doing something to control shadowy parts of their own movement, particularly the Haqqani network, which can hardly be [referred](#) to, as President Vladimir Putin said at the Valdai Discussion Club in October, as “momentary fellow travelers.”

On drug control, there are no shortcuts in sight. The Taliban have pledged their resolve against illicit drugs, citing religious imperatives, increased drug addictions among the Afghans, and their own unprecedented [past success](#) in “bringing narcotics content production to zero in 2001” as a result of their ban on poppy cultivation in 2000. Presently, the need for international legitimization heavily pushes the de facto Afghan government toward stricter drug controls than ever before. However, economically, the Taliban (and Afghanistan) can even less afford to implement strict drug control policies now than they could during the last years of their previous rule. Nor are they likely, for the time being, to alienate their main rural bases, which includes poppy-growing farmers, especially in the Taliban’s heartlands of Helmand and Kandahar. Patience is needed on the matter. Normally, effective drug control in conflict-torn, drug-producing countries only comes after the end of major fighting is secured and state functionality and control are consolidated.

On both antiterrorism and drug control, the Taliban face a range of hurdles, including internal disagreements. Domestically, aside from their main asset of military-enforcement potential, another factor that plays into their hands is the profound conflict fatigue among all strata of the Afghan population. Externally, the main leverage pushing the Taliban to moderate its course and show progress on meeting international security concerns is their need for international legitimization and especially foreign/international aid to meet basic humanitarian, reconstruction, and economic needs.

³ The current ISIS-K leader is Shahab al-Mohajir.

Implications for the Russia-Central Asia Track

Even though the Taliban [stated](#) that Russia is one of the top three or four states with which they have established good bilateral relations since the takeover, it does not automatically mean that Russia has solid leverage over them. If in neighboring Central Asia, Russia is, indeed, the key external security player, then Moscow's leverage over Afghanistan and the Taliban is largely confined to active and skillful mediation and diplomacy. Russia retains less direct leverage over the Taliban authorities than do Pakistan, China, or Qatar. In contrast to China or India, Russia has no major economic ties or projects with Afghanistan. Russia is less relevant to the Afghan economy than are the Central Asian states, three of which supply half of Afghanistan's electricity, with the other half coming from Iran. In contrast to Pakistan and Iran, Russia has no direct security and aid leverage over local groups and factions. In sum, while Russia has security concerns about Afghanistan, its direct influence in the intra-Afghan context is limited. Hence, for Russia, collective action by means of cooperation with regional powers and multilateral frameworks with a heavy regional footprint remains even more important than the Russian-Afghan bilateral format.

The two main pillars in Russia's regional track are security (confined to Central Asia and the CSTO) and political-diplomatic activity extending to the region and beyond. More specifically, on the Russia-Central Asia track, the main challenge since the Taliban takeover is the possible intensification of intra-Afghan strife in the country's north. Strife here runs against Russia's security interests due to the possible spill-over of violence and humanitarian crises drawing in Central Asian state and non-state actors. If the Afghan north becomes a hub of *major* anti-Taliban resistance under the leadership of Afghan-Tajik warlords (which has not been the case yet), more militants from Central Asia would be drawn in, which would partly reproduce the situation of the late 1990s. Likewise, a brutal crackdown by the Taliban against disloyal northern enclaves could push local militants, including Central Asian exiles, to infiltrate Central Asia. These dynamics have been compounded by a new risk (more perceived than real) of major Afghan refugee flows heading into previously marginal destinations in Central Asia.

What complicates the situation further is that this time, risks have not just one-sidedly emanated *from* Afghanistan. They have also come in the form of Tajik-Afghan inter-state tensions, wars of words, and escalation on both sides. Tajikistan has remained the sole Central Asian state that is staunchly opposed to direct talks with the Taliban; it flirts with the nascent anti-Taliban Afghan resistance and has hosted its leaders such as Amrullah Saleh, Akhmad Masoud Jr., and Abdul Latif Pedram. Moscow has urged restraint and is likely to go to great lengths to prevent tensions from escalating. Russia's main response has been careful balancing: for example, in late October, Moscow simultaneously held both the largest CSTO drill along the Tajik-Afghan border in years and Moscow-based regional talks on Afghanistan also involving the Taliban as *de facto* Afghan authorities.

This balancing on Russia's part will continue, even if it has limits. On the one hand, Moscow understands that the main motive behind Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's drive to elevate threats from the Taliban while playing the pan-Tajik card is to boost his domestic credentials. (Tajikistan is the only Central Asian state yet to have its first leadership transition since the mid-1990s.) On the other hand, Russia will not serve as a conduit for any destabilizing, belligerent, or extreme rhetoric or policies, even coming from allies. Moscow has been avoiding being instrumentalized and drawn in by Dushanbe's overreactions so as not to spoil its working bilateral and multilateral contacts with the new Afghan authorities.

Conclusion

On the positive side, Russia's influence in Central Asia has visibly increased since mid-2021 in both diplomatic and security terms due to developments in Afghanistan. This influence and outreach are not confined to the CSTO alone, as demonstrated by Moscow's rapprochement with Tashkent on the Afghan issue. In fact, non-CSTO Uzbekistan's position on Afghanistan and the Taliban appeared to be closer to Russia's than that of Moscow's CSTO ally Tajikistan. However, this time, Russia's influence in the region has increased neither in contrast to nor at the expense of, Central Asian states' passiveness, inaction, or declining roles. On the contrary, most Central Asian states also stepped up their diplomatic and security activity and raised their own regional and, in the cases of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, broader international profiles. This speaks to a mutual win-win situation for Russia and Central Asia.

As for any wider, longer-term impact that the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan may have on the spread of fundamentalist influences and forms of Islam in Central Asia, the scale of that impact is yet to be seen, but the overall concern is valid. However, this potential challenge is hardly one for Russia to address or solve, even in view of its role as the main security provider in the region. This fundamental challenge can only be reduced or neutralized by the Central Asian states' own policy and developmental choices and priorities, religious policies, and evolving socio-political systems.