

Russian Interests in Afghanistan

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SCEEUS Report No. 1, 2021

Executive Summary

Russia is quickly adapting to the new realities in Afghanistan with policies marked by pragmatism and the pursuit of its core interests – security in Afghanistan and the strengthening of its regional influence, in particular in Tajikistan.

The Kremlin will capitalise on its early engagement with the Taliban and seek to develop a pragmatic approach to Taliban rule. It will partner with the Taliban to contain rival terrorist groups in Afghanistan, such as Islamic State Khorasan Province, and continue to seek guarantees that Afghanistan will not become a haven for jihadist/terrorist groups that target Russia or its allies.

Russia will also use the situation in Afghanistan to signal its return to the global power competition. Afghanistan will serve as an argument against the West's democratisation and human rights agendas, and that the US has proved to be an unreliable partner, and to underline its own credibility as a global partner for anti-Western regimes.

Despite the shared interests on security, terrorism, narcotics and refugee flows, the current state of Russia-West relations in general and Russian-US relations in particular means that the prospects for future fruitful cooperation on Afghanistan are slim. The US-Russian global rivalry also helps to explain why there was little if any constructive cooperation in the UN Security Council between Russia and the West – or the West and China for that matter – as Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban.

Introduction

The aim of this brief is to provide a better understanding of Russia's interests in Afghanistan. It presents an overview of Soviet/Russian-Afghan relations and maps Russian interests after Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban. In addition, it discusses Moscow's role and interests in the former-Soviet Central Asian space, and how Russia's Afghanistan policies reflect the overall increase in Russian-US geopolitical competition.

A History of Friendship and Intervention

Russia's longstanding relations with Afghanistan emerged in the 19th century, in the context of "The Great Game" of Russian-British confrontations over Afghanistan and neighbouring territories between 1830 and 1907. Russia sent its first diplomatic mission to Kabul in 1878. At the time, Imperial Russia was seeking trade routes with India having expanded its control across Central Asia, while Great Britain viewed Afghanistan as an important buffer state. Under the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, the Russian and British empires agreed on spheres of influence. Russia conceded Afghanistan to the British and was given today's Central Asia and northern Iran in return.

Another formative moment in the Russian-Afghan relationship was the anti-Russian Central Asian revolt of 1916 when Muslims in Central Asia revolted against Russia. The Basmachi movement, which was behind the uprising, received some support from the Afghan government and the rebels used Afghanistan as a safe haven. Nonetheless, the new Soviet Russian state supported Afghanistan in the third Anglo-Afghan war of 1919 and was the first country to establish diplomatic relations with Afghanistan in that year. By the 1920s, Afghanistan was receiving Soviet financial aid and other aid in kind.

After 1919, Afghanistan's foreign policy was one of non-alignment. Following renewed anti-British sentiment after the third Anglo-Afghan war, however, a friendship treaty between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union was formalised in 1921. A non-aggression pact was also signed in 1928. Nonetheless, the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in 1929 and 1930, against the Basmachi movement which was conducting border raids into Soviet Central Asia.

After the Second World War, the governments in Kabul and Moscow enjoyed a friendly relationship and the Soviet Union provided considerable aid and development assistance to Afghanistan. In the mid-1950s, the Soviet Union increased its economic, military and technical aid to its poorer neighbour. An arms agreement in 1958 allowed the country to modernise its army with Soviet weapons, partly in exchange for oil exploitation rights in the northern parts of Afghanistan.

By the early 1970s, Afghanistan had become heavily dependent on the Soviet Union. The then president, Daoud Khan, tried to balance this dependency by developing closer ties with the US and insisting on the country's non-aligned status. However, President Khan was overthrown and killed in the Saur revolution of April 1978 and the formation of a Soviet-aligned government led by President Mohammad Taraki followed. A new 20-year friendship treaty with the Soviet Union was signed in December 1978.

The Soviet Invasion

On Christmas Day 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in support of the government. A key driver of the decision to commence Operation Storm-333 was to protect Marxist-Leninist ideology. The government had become increasingly unpopular and Moscow feared a collapse of the government and the army. President Taraki had been overthrown in a coup by his former protégé, Hafizullah Amin, in September 1979 and murdered in October. Amin had taken over as president.

Moscow's fear of the collapse of the Afghan Communist Party government was closely aligned with another factor in the intervention. In line with traditional Russian foreign policy thinking, which sought security through the creation of buffer states and expansion, Afghanistan was seen as of strategic importance to the security of the borders of the Soviet Union. Against this background, the Kremlin sought to disrupt US efforts to gain greater influence in Afghanistan. Economic factors may also have played a role, as the Soviet Union sought access to raw materials and inexpensive manufactured goods.

On the first day of the invasion, Soviet forces killed Amin, who had formally been an ally, and took control of Kabul. The following day, a Kremlin loyalist, Babrak Karmal, was installed as Afghanistan's new president. Following the invasion, the Soviet Union scaled up its aid to Afghanistan to support the economy and to rebuild the military.

Initially, the occupation went well for the Soviet forces. They captured the major cities, the regional towns and the airbases. The new government in Kabul was amenable to Soviet influence. In addition, like the US later, the Soviets believed in soft power and made attempts to win the "hearts and minds" of the locals. Tens of thousands of young Afghans were sent to the Soviet Union to study and for ideological education. They were expected to form the core of the future Afghan administration and to occupy key jobs in the economic sector.

However, Moscow soon found itself bogged down in a war that it could not win. The resistance to the Soviet forces, which consisted of various mujahedin groups ("those engaged in jihad"), quickly grew stronger and the war rippled through the country. With only 115,000 soldiers – most of whom were young conscripts, but also air assault soldiers and Spetsnaz units – the Soviet military footprint was relatively light. The Afghan army consisted of around 80,000 men on paper but in reality may only have been 30,000, and low morale meant that there were frequent desertions. Like the US later, the Soviet Union had superiority on the ground and in the air, but this was of limited help. The insurgents were often able to elude their enemy and find refuge in the mountains. Over time, the mujahedin's armaments also improved as weapons filtered in through Pakistan.

In February 1989, the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan. Estimates vary, but between 500 000 and 2 million Afghans and around 15,000 Soviet troops had been killed in the first decade of the war. The Soviet-backed Afghan government collapsed in 1992, but the war has continued ever since.

The Post-occupation Years

Following the end of the Soviet occupation and the break-up of the Soviet Union, relations between Russia and Afghanistan hit rock bottom. However, Moscow worked consistently to improve the situation. Under President Boris Yeltsin, Russia dropped its support for the communist regime led by President Najibullah in 1992 and began building relations with the mujahedin. After the fall of Najibullah, and as the Afghan civil war raged on, Russia provided military support to the Northern Alliance – the mujahedin movement dominated by ethnic Tajiks from Afghanistan. This relationship was not without incident. In 1993, for example, during the civil war in Tajikistan, Tajik rebels attacked a Russian border post from Afghanistan, killing 25 Russian servicemen. In response, Russia conducted retaliatory strikes in northern Afghanistan.

After the Taliban took control of Kabul in 1996, Russia continued to provide support to the Northern Alliance. Russia was deeply concerned about reports of Taliban support for Chechen rebels, and anxious that the Taliban was providing safe havens for terrorist groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, that were active in Russia and Central Asia. Russia was particularly enraged by the Taliban's recognition of Chechnya's unilateral declaration of independence in January 2000 and its agreement to host a Chechen embassy in Kabul.

Russia in Afghanistan Post-2001

When the US-led coalition went into Afghanistan in October 2001, Russia was critical but did not fully oppose the mission. Russia opened a diplomatic mission in Kabul shortly after the Taliban lost power in the capital in November 2001. The transitional government in Kabul was pro-US but relations with Russia were amicable. Moscow received the then head of the transitional government, Hamid Karzai, in March and June 2002. Russian military support to Afghanistan continued. Between 2002 and 2005, Russia provided the Afghan military with hardware, training and logistical services worth US\$ 30 million per year, as well as humanitarian aid. Russia was the 18th largest donor to Afghanistan in that period.

Afghan-Russian relations began to cool in 2004 because of deteriorating relations between Russia and the West linked, among other things, to Ukraine's Orange Revolution. In 2006, Russia ceased all military aid to the by then unwaveringly pro-Western Karzai government.

When Afghan-US relations deteriorated, Afghan-Russian cooperation was renewed. In 2008, during Barack Obama's bid for the presidency, the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan became a key campaign issue and Obama's team openly criticised Karzai for failing to deal with Afghanistan's endemic corruption. As a result, Karzai sought to diversify his country's foreign relations away from its focus on relations with the US, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the West. These developments coincided with a further deterioration in Russian-Western relations in the aftermath of Moscow's military intervention in Georgia.

As a result, Afghan-Russian government-level contacts restarted. Just days before Obama's inauguration in January 2009, the Afghan government publicised an exchange of letters between the Afghan and Russian presidents, in which the then President of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev,

committed to assist Afghanistan with training and equipping the Afghan army. The signal to Obama and the West was clear: Afghanistan had other friends too.

As Western criticism of President Karzai mounted, and Western-Russian relations went from bad to worse, Afghan-Russian relations improved. As a gesture, President Karzai attended the opening of the Winter Olympics in Sochi in February 2014 – an event that was boycotted by several Western heads of state. (There was no Afghan team competing in the Winter Olympics.) Karzai also publicly supported Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and drew parallels with Afghan claims to territories across the Durand Line, the contested Afghan-Pakistani border.

Russia's Economic Return

Both before and during the Soviet occupation, Moscow had invested heavily in Afghan infrastructure. One example from this period is the Salang highway and tunnel, the key transportation link through the Hindukush, which still symbolises an era of modernisation of the country.

With the improvement in Afghan-Russian relations came renewed and increased Russian economic activity in Afghanistan. In 2007, Moscow cancelled US\$ 11.1 billion of Afghanistan's US\$ 12 billion debt to Russia. Between 2008 and 2010, the volume of trade between the two countries almost tripled. By 2008, AFSOTR, a key Russian-Afghan joint venture logistics company established in Soviet times, was back in business.

In 2010, Russian companies were busy modernising the Naghlu dam east of Kabul and constructing electricity generating facilities in many provinces, as well as a mobile communication network in the northern parts of the country. Russia also cancelled Afghanistan's remaining debt in that year.

A rare state visit to Moscow by President Karzai followed in 2011, during which the Afghan and Russian presidents took steps to further boost economic and political ties. By 2014, when NATO started its pull-out, Russia was the fifth-largest importer of goods from, and the sixth-largest exporter to, Afghanistan. Trade volumes had exceeded a total of US\$ 1 billion in areas as diverse as construction, energy, agriculture, mining, and civil aviation.

Russia's Interests in Afghanistan

Russia's Afghanistan interests form part of its geopolitical positioning, and its zero-sum view on security policy and its rivalry with the USA. As US problems with pursuing its goals in Afghanistan – much like the Soviet Union three decades before – became more pressing, and the Russian-US relationship deteriorated, Afghanistan became a useful illustration of the Russian narrative of a weakened and less credible US.

However, Russia also has interests in Afghanistan, first and foremost linked to the issue of *security*. In Russia's 2016 official foreign policy document (para. 97), Russia describes how "persisting instability in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of all but a few international contingents poses a major security threat to Russia and other members of the CIS". The document highlights the threats of proliferation, terrorism, jihadism and instability to Central Asia and to Russia itself. In addition, the document points out the risks that stem from the illicit production and trafficking of narcotics. The National Security Strategy of 2021 also briefly mentions Afghanistan and the risk of the spread of international terrorism and extremism.

Russia also has vital interests in Central Asia, the former Soviet republics north of Afghanistan, that form part of the full picture necessary to understand Moscow's interest in Afghanistan. Russia's current political leadership is striving to create an exclusive and privileged sphere of interest throughout the former Soviet Union, including in the post-Soviet Central Asian republics. Central Asia is also regarded as a region of great strategic importance, as it is located between several regional powers and important economies such as China, India and Russia. Russia is also pragmatic, however, and has come to accept China's strong economic role in the region.

Central Asia is a critical region for the Russian military. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are all members of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Russia's military alliance. (Turkmenistan has long since adopted a "neutral" foreign policy, while Uzbekistan has twice been a member of CSTO and twice left it, the last time in 2012.) The Central Asian CSTO member states host Russian military installations, some of which are linked to Russia's nuclear weapon systems. As a result, Moscow views itself as a guarantor of security and stability in Central Asia. The region is not only part of Russia's perceived sphere of interest, but also constitutes one of its forward lines of defence and an important part of its great power posture.

Tajikistan plays a key role for Moscow in this respect. As a CSTO member state with a long border with Afghanistan, it is a *de facto cordon sanitaire*. Tajikistan is also a key country for Russian military installations abroad, as the country is host to a permanent Russian military contingent of some 7000 soldiers.

Overall, the security threat to Russia and the region emanates from instability, terrorism and religious extremism. Ever since the 1990s, when northern Afghanistan became an area for rest and recuperation for Chechen terrorists operating in Russia, Moscow has been wary of Afghanistan's role as a potential haven and training ground for terrorists that could turn either on Russia, or on its Central Asian allies in its perceived backyard.

These concerns remain relevant for a Taliban-run Afghanistan and may even have increased. The Taliban, with its strictly Afghan agenda, lacks territorial ambitions beyond its borders. Nonetheless, the issue of the spread of extremism reappeared following the establishment of an Islamic State (IS) group Afghan affiliate, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) in Afghanistan in 2015. ISIS-K, which was founded by a disaffected Pakistani Taliban group, embraces a more violent vision of Islamism than the Taliban. "Khorosan" alludes to a historical region consisting of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of Iran. ISIS-K disregards international borders and is seeking to establish Sharia law in the whole of Central Asia.

Moreover, the Taliban's victory could serve as a source of inspiration for young and disenfranchised Muslims across Central Asia. Widespread unemployment, gloomy prospects and a lack of political and/or economic power provide a perfect breeding ground for religious radicalisation. For Moscow, the concern is twofold. There is the threat of terrorism itself but also the threat to the political leadership in and the political stability of these countries. Terrorist groups and/or radical Islamist ideas could destabilise the Central Asian states and undermine the secular and authoritarian – but also weak – regimes there. This in turn would both weaken Russian influence in the region and threaten Russia itself. Radical Central Asian youth travelling to Afghanistan could join groups such as ISIS-K and receive combat training and experience. This could lead the organisation to hit targets in Central Asia and Russia in the future.

Another threat to Russia is the drug trade. Afghanistan is the world's biggest producer of opium and heroin. Moscow has accused the West of doing too little to fight this problem, which has hit Russia hard, as both a transit and a destination country for narcotics. More than 500,000 Russians are estimated to have died from Afghan heroin since the start of US engagement in 2001. It is an open question whether the Taliban will fight the lucrative trade, or the movement will turn a blind eye to drug production and trade should the country spiral further into economic crisis.

Like the EU, Russia fears increased migration flows linked to the Taliban takeover. Such fears include not only illegal migration into Tajikistan and other allies in Central Asia, risking destabilisation there, but also the potential for an influx of refugees into Russia. Apart from a general unwillingness to host migrants, there is also the fear that terrorists might be hiding in the refugee flows. At a meeting of United Russia Party members on 22 August 2021, President Putin pointed out that once Afghan refugees entered Central Asia, they could easily get to Russia because of the long shared borders and the lack of visa restrictions. The northern border of Afghanistan is probably the most porous now that various walls have been constructed along the westbound route from Afghanistan to Europe following the migration crisis of 2015. Once in Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, it is possible to travel onwards to Russia without a visa.

A further threat from the Kremlin's perspective is the renewed potential for a US military presence in the Central Asian states. Since its exit from Afghanistan, the US has been looking for opportunities to monitor developments from outside the country and might use neighbouring countries as bases for operations against ISIS-K and other terrorist groups.

In the period immediately after September 2001, Russia was consumed by domestic concerns, not least in the North Caucasus, and less forceful in defending what it regards as its spheres of influence. The US managed to establish several military hubs in the region to supply its operation in Afghan. Between 2001 and 2005, for example, the US cooperated with Uzbekistan on transit, airbases and rendition flights, until criticism in Washington of the Andijan massacre. In Tajikistan, the US Air Force was given permission to refuel its aircraft at the Ayni airbase near Dushanbe.

After the US announced its decision to leave Afghanistan in 2011, Washington's attention on Central Asia diminished. The last US base in Central Asia was closed in 2014, when NATO's combat mission in Afghanistan ended. The C5+1 format was introduced by the US in 2016 to

maintain some sort of political influence and contact with the Central Asian states, but with limited impact.¹

Now that the coalition forces have left Afghanistan, new ways to protect certain US interests are being examined. Washington has announced that it will continue to fight terrorist networks based in Afghanistan but this is unlikely to be effective without a US military presence in Afghanistan's neighbourhood. The regional geopolitical realities offer few options other than Tajikistan or Uzbekistan as candidates for re-establishing military bases. The US media reports that the Pentagon is eyeing these countries.

Since the US left the region in 2014, however, much has changed on the global geopolitical scene. US relationships with both Russia and China – another important regional player – have sharply deteriorated. It is therefore likely that both powers will do what they can to keep the US out of the region. Russia (and China) have several tools at their disposal. In addition to the CSTO framework, the Tajik economy remains dependent on remittances from Tajiks working in Russia (and on Chinese loans).

Russia is also interested in exploiting the propaganda potential of US failure in Afghanistan. The Kremlin's initial reaction was that the US lost, and therefore Russia won. Washington's humiliation was perceived as a not-insignificant consolation for the still traumatic experience of Russia's own defeat in Afghanistan in Soviet times. As the complexities of the evolving situation have become more evident, however, Moscow's position has become more ambivalent. Today, it insists that it does not want to be left alone with "the mess the US has created in Russia's backyard". Putin has committed to work with the West to "normalize the situation" in Afghanistan and to "build good neighbourly relations" with the country.

Nonetheless, Russia is likely to use the US failure in Afghanistan to the maximum as an argument against what in the Russian narrative is usually called "interference in domestic affairs", and as an argument against the promotion of democratic values. One example of such rhetoric was Putin's assertion, in a joint press conference with Chancellor Merkel, that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan proved that it was time for the West to end its "policy of imposing someone's outside values from abroad". The president continued: "We know Afghanistan, we know it well. [...] We saw how this country is built and how counterproductive it is to try to force unnatural forms of governance and public life upon it".

Russia's Relationship with the Taliban: What to Expect?

Moscow's attitude to the Taliban evolved significantly around 2010. Officially, Russia still classified it as a proscribed terrorist organisation. Over time, however, it came de facto to recognise the Taliban as one of the most important parties to an Afghan peace settlement. There had probably been limited contacts in the 1990s, but these were expanded and confirmed by Putin in 2015.

¹ The C5-1 format consists of the US plus the five former Soviet Central Asian republics Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and has been set up to enhance cooperation and coordination with, and among, Central Asian countries plus the United States.

Three factors drove this shift to more engagement with the Taliban: first, Russia's desire to increase its influence in Afghanistan as the Taliban became a more important force; second, the increasingly geopolitical power struggle between Russia and the US; and, third, the emergence of IS, which challenged the supremacy of the Taliban and made Moscow and the Taliban possible allies in the fight against ISIS-K.

From the early 2010s, Moscow was exploring diplomatic ways to influence developments in Afghanistan. As the US and NATO reduced their presence and the Taliban steadily gained strength across the country, Russia stepped up its outreach efforts. As a result, Moscow set up a number of diplomatic initiatives, often organised as parallel dialogue platforms to Western-led initiatives. Russia established the Moscow format of regional peace consultations on Afghanistan with the participation of the Taliban in 2017 and an informal inter-Afghan dialogue in Moscow in 2019, the latter organised under the auspices of Afghan diaspora organisations in Russia. The dialogue brought together leaders of several major movements and factions of the former Afghan Northern Alliance, mujahideen groups and the Taliban to discuss the prospects for peace. These initiatives were taken even though the Taliban continued to be on the official Russian list of designated terrorist organisations.

A similar effort was the Chinese-Russian-US dialogue, a joint initiative that grew out of the US-Russian dialogue on Afghanistan. This format expanded to include Pakistan in mid-2019. Russia has also worked to establish dialogue with Washington over Afghanistan, and the US and Russian special envoys for Afghanistan began to meet regularly in 2019. Several efforts have also been made since the end of 2016 to use the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as a platform for consultations on Afghanistan, but with limited impact.

When negotiations between the US and the Taliban began in late 2018, Moscow officially supported them while at the same time questioning any peace initiative that did not involve Russia. In February 2019, as the Doha negotiations between the Taliban and the US continued, there was a new turn in Russia-Taliban relations. Russia moved away from its limited partnership approach to outright engagement. This was in part triggered by a diplomatic blunder, when a senior Taliban official contradicted Russia's denials that the talks were government-backed. Above all, however, it was a consequence of a reassessment of Afghanistan's political trajectory, as the Taliban were winning ground and fighting IS.

In May 2019, when a delegation of Afghan politicians and representatives of the Taliban met in Moscow to celebrate 100 years of Russia-Afghanistan diplomatic relations, Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, called for a swift withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. Russia had come full circle and now had a shared agenda with the Taliban on conflict resolution.

Relations Between Russia and President Ghani's Administration

Russia's increased contacts with the Taliban did not go unnoticed in Kabul. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani became increasingly frustrated by what he saw as Moscow's bypassing of the Afghan government in the Russia-initiated peace negotiations. As relations with the Taliban became more

open and obvious, and Russia continued to court Afghan opposition figures in peace negotiations and engage with the Taliban without the presence of Afghan government representatives, Russia's relations with Ghani's administration worsened.

In December 2016, when Russia hosted its first major diplomatic summit on Afghanistan, Afghan government officials expressed concern about being side-lined and not invited. In response, Russia tried to balance its engagement with Ghani's government and the Taliban. Russian officials invited Afghan government representatives to the six-party talks hosted in Moscow in February 2017 and agreed that "any intra-Afghan peace process must accept the leading role of Kabul".

President Ghani's government, however, remained dissatisfied with various Russia-led initiatives and continued to criticise the Kremlin's contacts with the Taliban. Moscow, in turn, claimed that its efforts were aimed at facilitating peace in Afghanistan, not forming a partnership with the Taliban. Moscow failed to reassure the Afghan government, however, and Kabul's concerns increased following US allegations that Russia had transferred small arms to the Taliban.

In its criticism of Russia, the Afghan government received support from the US. Thus, the US initially rejected an offer from Russia to participate in Moscow-led negotiations with the Taliban in August 2018. Later the same year, however, the US sent its special envoy on Afghanistan to participate in a similar dialogue meeting.

Russian Actions During the Withdrawal

When the final US withdrawal commenced in 2021, Russia stepped up its engagement in Afghanistan still further as part of the greater geopolitical struggle with the US, and in an attempt to fill the vacuum and stem the wave of instability in its own backyard. Whatever the exact motives, Russia's contacts with the Taliban sharply increased. A Taliban delegation was received in Moscow in early July 2021, and Russia received important assurances. Moscow was given security guarantees for the Russian diplomatic mission in Afghanistan and was assured that the Taliban would not violate Afghanistan's northern borders. In addition, the Taliban promised that no organisation would be allowed to use the country as a base to attack Russia or other neighbouring countries.

The Russian tone vis-à-vis the Taliban became more friendly. In late July, Foreign Minister Lavrov commended the Taliban for being "of sound mind", while being critical of the Afghan government's efforts to come to an agreement on power sharing. Russia's envoy in Afghanistan went further, calling the Taliban's rapid takeover of border areas "positive" for regional security.

As the Taliban took control of more border posts in early July 2021, including those in the north, Putin offered military help to Tajikistan. In mid-July, as the Taliban brought large parts of Afghanistan under its control – including Shir Khan Bandar, the major border crossing with Tajikistan – Russia launched an exercise in Tajikistan in which some 1000 troops from Russia's 201st military base outside Dushanbe took part.

When Afghanistan fell to the Taliban in mid-August 2021, Lavrov spoke about the Taliban with respect. The Russian Ambassador to Kabul, Dimitri Zhirnov, was quoted as saying that the Taliban had behaved “in a responsible, civilised manner” as it consolidated control over Kabul. Moscow claimed that it had no plans to evacuate its embassy. Shortly after, while the West hurried to evacuate its citizens from an increasingly chaotic Kabul, the Russian Foreign Ministry offered help with evacuating people from Afghanistan. It stated that the Taliban had issued “appropriate security guarantees” and advised that the realities on the ground should be taken into account when “building further relations with Afghanistan”.

However, the Russian-Taliban honeymoon seemed to end before it began. Just days later, Putin ordered four military aircraft to Kabul to evacuate Russian and other foreign citizens. Concerns over terrorist threats had grown, stirred up by Russian fears of IS influence in the region. When the new Taliban government was announced, a change in tone was discernible. The press secretary for the Russian President, Dmitry Peskov, stated that no one in the world had benefited from the Taliban coming to power. He referred to the continuing drug trafficking threat and the question of whether Afghanistan would remain a place from which terrorist groups would feel free to operate.

Such statements are not just motivated by the fear of terrorism. The muted Russian response to the Taliban’s victory is probably because Moscow does not want to alienate its Central Asian allies. The countries along Afghanistan’s northern border are not united in their approach to the Taliban. Uzbekistan’s attitude is lukewarm while Turkmenistan is believed to be quietly seeking a deal with the new regime in Kabul. Tajikistan, Russia’s most important partner in securing its interests in the region, rejects the Taliban outright and is now host to the anti-Taliban resistance. For Russia, it will be a delicate balancing act to pursue its interest in stability, on the one hand, and push for increased geopolitical influence in the region, on the other.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Since Soviet troops pulled out of Afghanistan in February 1989, Moscow’s policy towards the country has gone through several changes, adapting to the new realities in Afghanistan, in Russia, in the five former Soviet Central Asian republics and in its relationship with the US. The Kremlin’s policy shifts have been marked by pragmatism and the pursuance of Moscow’s core interests in regional security and increasing Russian influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia in the context of an evolving power struggle with Washington.

In the Russian view, the security risks emanating from Afghanistan come in the form of terrorism, jihadism and political instability that could spread to Russia and/or into what it perceives as its Central Asian backyard. Other concerns are refugee flows, including those that could facilitate the penetration of radical elements into Russia, and the influx of illegal drugs from Afghanistan.

Russia is likely to keep these interests centre stage as it continues to adapt its policies to the new realities on the ground. Moscow will continue to adjust its Afghan strategy to maintain as much stability in Afghanistan as possible, while also enhancing its official position as the key security provider in Central Asia. The Kremlin will capitalise on its early engagement with the Taliban and develop a pragmatic approach to Taliban rule. It will balance various factors, such as the different stance of its key partner, Tajikistan, and the need to influence the new rulers of Kabul as much as

necessary to pursue Russian security concerns. Russia is likely to partner with the Taliban to contain rival terrorist groups, such as ISIS-K, in Afghanistan, and to continue to seek guarantees that Afghanistan will not become a safe haven for jihadist/terrorist groups targeting Russia or its allies. In addition, if the narco-traffic continues, Russia will try to reduce the trafficking of narcotics as an integral part of its Afghanistan policy. In parallel with its Taliban contacts, Russia is likely to maintain contacts with any regional or ethnic group that is not involved in actions against Russia. However, Russia is not likely to become openly involved in a future intra-Afghan struggle for power, should one emerge.

Russia is likely to use the terrorism argument to be tough on preventing refugees from Afghanistan reaching Russia. However, that Russia will pursue other interests unrelated to the conflict in Afghanistan cannot be excluded. For example, it could facilitate Afghan refugees (or guest workers and migrants long present in the country) reaching the Russian-EU border in a similar way to how Belarus has been shuttling migrants to the borders of Poland and Lithuania.

In parallel with containing the security threats to Russia emanating from Afghanistan, a key Russian interest is the strengthening of Russia's position in the Central Asian region's security matters, despite the fact that it has committed only limited resources to this end. Russia will use its influence to keep US military installations out of the former Soviet Central Asian republics, even if such a military presence would be there to fight a common enemy. In this, China, which is already a strong economic influence in the region and has increasing security interests there, is also likely to be helpful. Furthermore, Russia is likely to try to ensure that the US has no opportunity to re-establish its military foothold in Afghanistan.

Finally, Moscow will use the Afghanistan situation to confirm Russia's return to the global power competition and as an argument against the West's democratisation and human rights agendas. The Kremlin is not likely to miss the opportunity, whenever possible and in whatever context, to point out that the US has proved itself an unreliable partner, thereby underlining its own credibility as a global partner to anti-Western regimes.

Given the current state of Russian-Western relations in general and Russian-US relations in particular, the prospects for future fruitful cooperation on Afghanistan are bleak, despite the existence of a set of shared interests on security, terrorism, narcotics and refugee flows. The US-Russian global rivalry also helps to explain why there was little if any constructive cooperation in the UN Security Council between Russia and the West (and the West and China for that matter) as the country fell into the hands of the Taliban.

However, Russia will probably try to use Afghanistan for "selective engagement" to pursue a normalisation of relations with the West on its own terms, and/or to use the enticement of Russian-EU cooperation on Afghanistan in order to undermine EU positions or achieve concessions on the sanctions put in place in response to Russian violations of the European security order. The EU should ensure that any cooperation with Russia on Afghanistan is not used to undermine Western values or commitments elsewhere, in particular regarding the many other conflicts in the post-Soviet space.



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