



A ROAD UNTRAVELED

# Reluctant Reentrance? Russia and Afghanistan post 2021

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This policy brief explores the potential role that Russia might have in Afghanistan now that the American and NATO forces have completely withdrawn from the country. It looks at the ways that the collapse of the United States-backed state apparatus and the American–NATO designed, trained and equipped army and police might shape Russia’s security policy towards Afghanistan. And it examines whether Russia will fill the vacuum in Afghanistan that the pull-out has left and how it might engage with the Taliban, whom it once opposed, beyond 2021.<sup>1</sup>

## A history of security relations between Afghanistan and Russia

On 15 August 2021, a forced regime change took place in Afghanistan. The Taliban reached the Kabul gates after overrunning some 30 provinces. Ashraf Ghani’s flee from the country was the last act of perplexity in the 20-year joint effort of the Americans, the Europeans and the Afghans in building a democratic government. While the Taliban were busy overrunning provinces, the security and defence forces trained and equipped by the United States and NATO were disintegrating. With Ghani’s escape, the last faction of the Afghan army and police guarding Kabul simply disintegrated. The Taliban entered Kabul and retook power after 20 years of battles. The regime change is likely to affect Russia, the historical rival of the United States, in terms of security. These developments will thus shape a new relationship between Russia and Afghanistan.

Russia’s (and the Soviet Union) security relationship with Afghanistan from the 1950s to 2001 can be divided into two time periods based on the nature of engagement. The Soviet Union followed an “offensive-era” approach (1950s–1980s) to expand its sphere of influence in Afghanistan—where the British and Russian empires collided in the nineteenth century in what was termed as the “Great Game”. In this more modern period, it contributed enormously in building up the Afghan army and provided military hardware. The outcome of this engagement was destabilization because it ignited a four-decade-long war and other violence in Afghanistan. The “defensive era” began after the collapse of its installed government in Kabul (1990–2001). In this decade, Russia sought to deter destabilization spillover into Central Asia by working with non-state security providers primarily based in northern Afghanistan.

Although the Russian empire and then the Soviet Union, due to geopolitical competition with the British empire, had been eyeing Afghanistan for centuries, a remarkable era of engagement started in the 1950s. The Soviets infiltrated the Afghan army by

supporting its build-up in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1970s, it had ideological cadre within the Afghan security sector who precipitated the establishment of the first communist government in Afghanistan in 1978.<sup>2</sup> From 1955 to 1972, the Soviets provided 95 per cent of Afghanistan’s military assistance, and by 1979 had trained 10 per cent of Afghanistan military personnel, surpassing any other donor country at the time.<sup>3</sup> The Soviet Union’s decade of involvement (1979–1989) in Afghanistan brought in considerable Soviet military hardware and technical support. The security and military relations expanded further in this era as the Soviets trained, supported and advised Afghan army personnel.

Afghanistan’s proximity to the Soviet Central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan encouraged the Soviets to maintain security relations with the formal and informal Afghan security actors following its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989. Although the newly birthed Russian Federation wanted to keep the communist government in Kabul in power, it collapsed in 1992 for lack of Russian funding. The collapse radically reduced Russian security engagements in Afghanistan.

During the 1990s, Russia was preoccupied with its internal economic and political problems and thus had little involvement with Afghanistan. At the same time, conflicts in Tajikistan, the Caucasus and Chechnya consumed its military resources.<sup>4</sup> Moscow appeared to be more concerned about destabilizing effects from Afghanistan spilling into Central Asia than Afghanistan itself.<sup>5</sup> After the collapse of the communist regime in Kabul and the start of civil war in the country, Russia shifted its partnership from working with the central government to cooperating with the Northern Alliance against the Taliban government. Even though the Northern Alliance, composed of Tajik and Uzbek commanders, had fought the Soviet Union when it was supporting the Afghan government, Russia came to regard the Taliban as a greater threat and thus cooperated with its previous foe. The Taliban established close ties with the Chechens and Central Asian militant groups.<sup>6</sup>

1 The project “A Road untraveled? Options, Scenarios, and Recommendations for Future International and Regional Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan” is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS). This brief is part of a series discussing the implications of the US withdrawal for bilateral relations between Afghanistan and its neighbors. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

2 Goor Luc van de and Mathijs van Leeuwen, *The Netherlands and Afghanistan: Dutch Policies and Interventions Regarding the Civil War in Afghanistan* (Clingendael Institute, 2000).

3 Michael B. Bishku, “Turkey and Afghanistan: culture, security and economics”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, vol. 7 No. 3 (2020).

4 Interview with Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, Founding Director, Center for Governance and Markets, with Rajab Taieb, 14 October 2021.

5 *ibid.*

6 Barnett R. Rubin, *Afghanistan’s Security Stiaution and Peace Process: Comparing U.S and Russian Perspectives* (East West Institute, 2020).

## Russia transforms from a fully cooperative partner to a semi-competitor with the United States and NATO in Afghanistan

Russia also worried over interactions between the Taliban and Russian Islamic networks as well as with radical groups in the Central Asian Republics.<sup>7</sup> Another even larger-scale threat than religious extremism to Russian society was the opium smuggled out of Afghanistan (through Central Asia).<sup>8</sup> The instability within Afghanistan that was rife in the 1990s had allowed for the production and smuggling of Afghan opium, which was consuming a big part of Russia's fragile economy. The drug smuggling also helped proliferate organized crime in Russia and elsewhere.

Hence, in the early 2000s, Russia welcomed the United States and NATO's global war on terrorism in Afghanistan. It hoped the coalition would bring peace and stability in the region and eradicate the opium production. Russia remained fully cooperative in the first half of the 2000s. Newly installed, President Putin had neither a long-term policy regarding the United States and NATO nor the power he possesses today.<sup>9</sup> And Russia had no appetite for engaging militarily in Afghanistan due to its still-stinging earlier involvement with its heavy casualties. Rather, Russia saw the American–NATO military mission as removing one of its considerable headaches.<sup>10</sup>

Russia did not object to the American military bases in Central Asia and even facilitated American–NATO logistics by allowing their supplies to be transported to Afghanistan by the Northern Distribution Network through Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus to connect Baltic and Caspian Sea ports.<sup>11</sup> In those years, Russia also had no geopolitical problem with the United States and NATO in other territories. Their interests seemed to converge in Afghanistan.

That cosiness shifted beginning in 2014, provoked by several intertwined issues inside Afghanistan and in other regions. The failure of the United States-led coalition to stabilize Afghanistan enabled insecurity and instability to increase.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, former President Barack Obama's withdrawal plans added to Russia's fear of continuing insecurity.

With the emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) at the end of 2014 in Afghanistan, Russia no longer viewed the Taliban as a prime threat. The ISKP was a much greater threat to Russia, which accused the United States of creating the faction as a way to destabilize both Central Asia and Russia.<sup>13</sup> The ability

of ISKP in recruiting Russian-speaking Central Asian Muslims and maintaining strong footprints in northern Afghanistan areas bordering Central Asia prompted Russia to rethink its Afghanistan policy.<sup>14</sup>

By that point, President Putin had consolidated power at home, and Russia began to face off with the United States and NATO in new geopolitical and geostrategic positions. Russia's interventions in Ukraine and Georgia and NATO's increasing presence in Poland intensified the heated relations between Moscow and Washington.<sup>15</sup> The Bilateral Security Agreement signed between the United States and Afghanistan in 2014 added to Russia's concerns of the possible United States' intention to make Afghanistan a semi-permanent military presence.<sup>16</sup> The inability to stabilize the country fuelled Russia's paranoia of an ulterior agenda for the United States and NATO coalition in Afghanistan. And yet, Russia remained hopeful the United States and NATO would eventually succeed in producing a modicum of stability.<sup>17</sup>

Afghanistan's increasing opium production also remained a heavy burden for Russia. In 2012, poppy cultivation was 19 times larger than it had been under the Taliban in 2001.<sup>18</sup> The consequences for Russia were severe. It turned from a low drug-use country into a consumer-transit country for Afghan opium, and it became the single largest market for Afghan heroin.<sup>19</sup> Russia had been suffering around 3–5 per cent gross domestic product loss because of the narcotics smuggling,<sup>20</sup> which financed the Russian criminal networks. Drug trafficking became a national security threat due to its impacts on organized crime and regional terrorism.<sup>21</sup>

The Russian fear of spillover effects of religious extremism into Central Asia as well as into Russia eventually materialized. Radicalization in Chechen as of 2013, the many Central Asian nationals joining the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) as of 2011 and the terrorist attacks in Moscow in 2010 were seen as byproducts of the instability in Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> Russia began partnering with the Taliban to leverage its influence in the country and thus work to deter the threat of the ISKP.<sup>23</sup> The Taliban's success in cracking down on the ISKP in the northwest of Afghanistan incentivized Russia to continue working with them to contain the ISKP spread.<sup>24</sup>

With the Doha deal between the United States and the Taliban and the announcement of the American forces' unconditional exit in April 2021 by President Joe Biden, Moscow's expectation of the Taliban regaining power increased tremendously. It scrambled to mediate de facto cooperation between the Taliban and some former Mujahideen leaders in northern Afghanistan, which

7 Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, "The Afghanistan–Central Asia relationship: what role for EU", EUCAM Working Paper (2013).

8 Ekaterian Stepanova, "Russia's concerns relating to Afghanistan and the broader region in the context of the US/NATO withdrawal", CIDOB Policy Research Project, (Barcelona: Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, 2013).

9 Murtazashvili, 2021.

10 Interview with Caroline Rose, Senior Analyst and Head of the Power Vacuums Program at the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, with Rajab Taieb, 19 October 2021.

11 "NATO's once vital supply link to Afghanistan via Russia closes", Stars and Stripes, 05, 2015.

12 Murtazashvili, 2021.

13 David G. Lewis and others, "Great powers: Russia, China, India", NDC Research Paper Series (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2021).

14 Rubin, 2020.

15 Rose, 2021.

16 *ibid.*

17 Murtazashvili, 2021.

18 Stepanova, 2013.

19 *ibid.*

20 *ibid.*

21 Mark Galeotti, "Narcotics and nationalism: Russian drug policies and feature", Foreign Policy at Brookings, 2016.

22 Murtazashvili, 2021.

23 David G. Lewis and others, Great Powers (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2021).

24 Antonio Giustozzi, "Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the resurgence of the Taliban", Central Asia Program, 07, 2021.

precipitated the quick collapse of the northern provinces in August 2021.<sup>25</sup> The intention of that move was to assist the Taliban in securing the border provinces.

Although Washington dominated the Afghan peace process and the negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, Russia forged a role for itself. From 2014 onwards, it started expanding its political influence in Afghanistan's politics. It hosted conferences on Afghan peace before and after the United States–Taliban Doha deal in 2020.<sup>26</sup> Inviting the Taliban delegation had consequences for the Afghan government. The Taliban used such an international stage for gaining legitimacy and strengthening its position.

Although the ISKP, opium smuggling and radicalization constituted formidable threats, Russia appeared to be exaggerating the threats from Afghanistan to protect its influence in Central Asia. It also used the threats to highlight its importance as a guarantor of security there. Amid the peaks of fighting in Afghanistan between the Ashraf Ghani government forces and the Taliban, Russia launched a joint military drill with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan near their borders with Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> Even after the collapse of the Ghani government, the Russia-led Collective Security Organization Treaty launched a six-day military drill in Tajikistan—the largest in years—to deter any security threats emanating from Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup> This pattern of exaggerating threats seems to be lingering.

Russia's engagement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 contributed both to whatever stability eked out and to the overriding instability. Russia's cooperation with the United States and NATO ended the chaotic era of the 1990s and the civil war. Its partnership with the Taliban from 2014 onwards resulted in the temporary oppression of the ISKP.<sup>29</sup> But Russia's support empowered the Taliban in its clashes with the then-government security and defence forces, which led to increases in fighting and to casualties.<sup>30</sup>

Moscow's Afghanistan policy post-2001 has centred on diffusing the most serious threats to its national security through any possible means and to increasing its political influence. It has been a path of interchangeable partners for the Russians.

### **Russia and Afghanistan beyond 2021, in the vacuum left by the United States and NATO**

Although the United States' and NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan pleases Russia in terms of strategic competition on the international level. But it also leaves Moscow with new challenges. In the absence of foreign forces in Afghanistan, Russia might face new levels of instability and uncertainty.<sup>31</sup> Even though the Taliban have consolidated power in the countryside, and there is no sign of major competition for power that would

challenge them, there is a vacuum in terms of military, political and economic support for their government in Kabul.

As a donor-dependent country, Afghanistan has been severely affected by the freezing of its assets and the suspension of international financial support since the Taliban takeover of government. The looming poverty and the overall economic downturn could fuel greater instability as insurgent groups, mainly the ISKP, escalate their recruitment of new soldiers.<sup>32</sup> The disintegration of Afghanistan's security sector has undermined any future counterterrorism efforts. These situations are likely to result in an increase in opium production and smuggling. It is also highly likely that insurgent groups such as ISKP and Al-Qaeda will benefit and finance their activities with the drug trade.<sup>33</sup>

For now, ISKP and the resurgence of opium production seem to constitute the most pressing concerns for Russia. Russia will work with any group in Afghanistan because it follows a realpolitik approach and does not care about internal issues, human rights or democratic values. However, it cannot work with ISKP for ideological constraints:<sup>34</sup> ISKP disregards international borders and aims to expand to the Khorasan Province, which historically encompasses parts of modern-day Islamic Republic of Iran, Central Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> Russia is likely to deepen its relationship with the Taliban government to deter the spread of ISKP and its religious extremism, especially into Central Asia.

Russia cannot afford a power vacuum in Afghanistan that would destabilize its periphery through the spillover of instability in terms of radicalization and an illicit economy.<sup>36</sup> Given Russia's economic problems, however, a costly military engagement is unlikely. Russia is more likely to support the Taliban government, to some extent, with military hardware and with advisers to enable it to prevent further instability. But it will not repeat its 1980s involvement.<sup>37</sup> Although, that might not be a welcome prospect anyway if the Taliban government rejects Moscow's influence. The Taliban repeatedly has voiced its rejection of foreign intervention into Afghanistan's politics.<sup>38</sup>

Russia's attempts to influence the Taliban also appears motivated by its aim to deter heavy Western, European and Chinese influence due to the geopolitical issues. Although all Western countries closed their embassies in Kabul following the Taliban takeover, Russia has kept its diplomatic mission open. Its current loner status, and thus potential to influence, could be upended if the Taliban government is recognized internationally.<sup>39</sup> To exert influence in Kabul, Russia has launched a carrot-and-stick approach by hosting international talks (21 October). But it has yet to formally recognize the Taliban government. However, it has urged the international community to support Afghanistan economically and is working to remove the Taliban from its list of extremist organizations.<sup>40</sup>

25 *ibid.*

26 Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia hosts Afghan peace conference, hoping to boost talks", Reuters, 03, 2021.

27 Olzhas Auyezov, "Russia drills attack helicopters, pledge to secure Tajik-Afghan border", Reuters, 07, 2021.

28 "Russia-led bloc holds large-scale drills near Tajik-Afghan border", Reuters, 10, 2021.

29 Giustozzi, 2021.

30 Omar, "The Taliban have become mercenaries of Moscow, Afghan officials say", Salam Times, 08, 2020.

31 Rose, 2021.

32 Rajab Taiieb, "UN envoy says Afghan situation 'grim,' calls for UN engagement", TOLONews, 09, 2021.

33 Madina Morwat, "UNODC warns against insurgents use of drug", TOLONews, 10, 2021.

34 Murtazashvili, 2021.

35 "Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K)", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 11, 2018.

36 Rose, 2021.

37 *ibid.*

38 Rajab Taiieb, "New chapter opened in Afghanistan, World relations: Muttaqi", TOLONews, 10, 2021.

39 Rose, 2021.

40 Vladimir Soldatkin and Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, "Putin says Russia is mulling excluding Taliban from list of extremist groups", Reuters, 10, 2021.

President Putin has also said the international community should free Afghanistan's central bank reserves.

To safeguard its influencing potential, Russia is likely to exaggerate the threat of the ISKP and to work with non-state actors who can possibly compel the Taliban to listen to Moscow and to regard Russia as its main partner rather than China or any other country. President Putin has said that ISIL fighters are moving from Iraq and Syria to northern Afghanistan and actively assembling there, a claim repeatedly denied by the Taliban.<sup>41</sup> He has said ISKP might attempt direct expansion into the Commonwealth Independent States.<sup>42</sup> Russia has also said the new authorities in Kabul should fight insurgent groups.

Russia's possible cooperation with non-state actors in Afghanistan would be limited, however, if only to avert heightened instability. Due to the 20 years of highly centralistic governance, local powerbrokers, mainly members of the former Northern Alliance, have been weakened drastically.<sup>43</sup> Russia ultimately will have little choice but to support the Taliban government to ensure stability.

With many Central Asian militant groups based in northern Afghanistan, the Taliban government quite possibly could avoid conflict with them to encourage their continued presence and thus provide leverage against foreign powers, mainly Russia.<sup>44</sup> For now, the new government in Kabul and Moscow are likely to act cautiously but are expected to cooperate with one another because it serves their interests.

## Conclusion

Russia perceives instability in Afghanistan through the lens of the spillover effects into its Central Asian backyard. Russia's number one priority in Afghanistan thus is stability rather than who rules and how. The hasty withdrawal of the United States and NATO has served Russia's interest in repositioning itself as the only guarantor of security in Central Asia and a loyal partner in the region. The United States and NATO's 20 years of involvement in Afghanistan served Russia's interests by removing some of its headaches. Now the withdrawal has further served Russian interests by demonstrating the unreliability of Washington in the eyes of local allies.

Moscow wants to fill the vacuum in Afghanistan that the American–NATO pull-out has left, although not militarily, only politically. The United States and NATO asserted their influence by political support to their allies and economic concessions. Russia is likely to do the same, and possibly even create problems for the Taliban government should it reject Moscow's influence. Russia wants the government in Kabul to listen when it speaks and count on the former foe as a regional power.

In terms of military involvement, Russia will not even attempt to directly engage, given its own historical experience and limited resources. It might provide a government in Kabul with some military hardware and advising support but will avoid militarily involvement.

Over the past 20 years, Russia followed a realpolitik approach towards Afghanistan. Democratic values, beliefs and human rights were subordinated to its national interests. The approach is highly likely to be the path going forward.

## Afghanistan in an autocratic neighbourhood: Adjustment pressures?

The 20-year effort of the Americans, the Europeans and the Afghans in building democratic institutions and spreading democratic values might not hold up in the long run. Given that Afghanistan has been surrounded by authoritarian regimes for decades, it is likely to become another one among them.

A remarkable perception in Russia, Central Asia and to some extent in Afghanistan is that the instability in Afghanistan stems from the absence of a powerful president and administration. This can be understood from rhetoric in the Russian and Central Asian media that "Afghanistan needs a Putin".<sup>45</sup> The Taliban might not be democratic but will appeal to the backing of Russia for the order and stability they could be expected to forge. In turn, the backing of regional countries, especially Russia, would help engender that stability, which at best could be described as merely negative peace (absence of war).<sup>46</sup>

There is a perception in many of the regional countries that democratization brings instability. Tajikistan's civil war was partly triggered by democratization efforts. The Kyrgyz Republic, the most democratic country in Central Asia, has experienced repeated revolutions.<sup>47</sup> Democratization in Afghanistan also failed to bring stability despite huge international backing. The growing perception that democratization brings instability is likely to usher in an authoritarian government in Afghanistan as the antidote. This would satisfy Russia if it indeed led to stability, even at the cost of social justice or positive peace.

41 Rajab Taieb, "Putin warns of extremist threats from Afghanistan", TOLONews, 10, 2021.

42 *ibid.*

43 Murtazashvili, 2021.

44 *ibid.*

45 Murtazashvili, 2021.

46 Rose, 2021.

47 Ayjaz Wani, "Kyrgyzstan: from democratic revolutions to coup", Observer Research Foundation, 11, 2020.

## Recommendations

- Russia should support the Taliban government politically to prevent its isolation. Isolation will harm both Afghanistan and the region.
- Russia should, to the extent possible, support the Taliban government militarily in terms of sharing intelligence and providing technical counterterrorism training and advice to enable it to counter any possible instability.
- Russia as a regional power should prepare the context for international engagement in Afghanistan, both economically and politically. International engagement can help keep the economy from collapse.
- The Taliban government should confront ISKP and other militant groups militarily to remove Russia's security concerns.
- The Taliban government should form an organized and regular army to maintain security. The army should be used to secure the northern borders and to confront the illicit economy.
- Both Russia and the Taliban government should refrain from opportunistic use of the militants. Using such groups as a tool for political purposes will only render bigger troubles in the future.
- Russia should support the Taliban government in fighting opium production and smuggling to prevent its proliferation from growing or sustaining as a financing source for insurgent groups and from flowing into the Russian market, further empowering criminal networks and mafias.
- Russia should advocate for the removal of Taliban members from the United Nations blacklist. Russia should also remove the Taliban from its list of extremist organizations. As long as the Taliban members' names remain on the blacklists, Kabul's cooperation with Russia and other countries will be limited. Such limitations will discourage and weaken the Taliban government in the needed fight against opium production and militant groups.
- Russia should help the Taliban government recover control over its central bank assets. The deepening economic downturn may lead to a total economic and social system collapse. The ensuing chaos and instability could pave the way for mass migration and expansion of the illicit economy and radicalization.
- Russia should encourage the Taliban to bring non-Taliban political figures and ethnic leaders into the government. Forming a broad-based government will decrease the chances for intercommunal conflicts. In a multi-ethnic country like Afghanistan with a bitter experience of civil wars, inclusiveness is imperative.

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