



POLICY BRIEF

Meeting in the Middle?

Russia, Afghanistan, and Europe

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This policy brief explores Russia's engagement with Afghanistan in 2021 and beyond. It discusses how the scheduled 2021 U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan could affect Russia's regional and domestic interests. It examines Russia's future engagement with Afghanistan, exploring scenarios, implications, and the need for policy adjustments in Kabul, Moscow, and other European capitals. It also reviews potential convergence areas for closer cooperation with European partners concerning Afghanistan.

Russia's strategic orientation toward Afghanistan can be traced to the nineteenth century when Russia regarded Afghanistan as an arena for great power plays on its southern border - first with the British and then with the United States during the Cold War.¹ In the last four decades, Russia's strategic rationale towards Afghanistan has been guided by the bloody experience, and eventual failure, of the Soviet invasion in 1979. Since the collapse of their client regime in 1992, Russian policy elites have viewed Afghanistan as a security threat with subsequent spillover effects, including radical Islam, terrorism, drugs, and instability. In the early years of the U.S.-led NATO intervention in Afghanistan, Russia saw the mission as a stabilisation factor for the region. However, since the 2014 U.S. military drawdown, Russia has engaged all sides in the Afghan conflict to reduce the risk of destabilisation for itself and Central Asia. Given the great power competition between the U.S. and Russia and the potential threats originating from Afghanistan to Central Asia, Russia will almost certainly be a dominant player in the complex geopolitics of Afghanistan after a post U.S. military withdrawal.

Russia in Afghanistan: An Ambivalent Policy

Russia has viewed Afghanistan through the lens of a U.S. strategic security interest that must be undermined to prevent NATO expansionism. At the same time, strained relations between the U.S., the EU, and Russia on other global issues (e.g., from NATO enlargement to the proxy war in Ukraine and Syria) have indirectly wedged Moscow's policy towards Afghanistan. As such, Russia's current posture towards the U.S. presence in Afghanistan can best be described as ambivalent.

While Moscow sees the long-term presence of NATO in Afghanistan as a serious threat to its regional interests, it has also warned against the risks of a sudden and hasty U.S. military exit which might destabilise regional security, especially in the fragile Central Asian states. Russia's primary security interest in Afghanistan is to curtail the spread of terrorism and radical Islam, including ISIS, into Central Asia and Russia.



The Caucasus and Central Asia. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

¹ The project "From Uncertainty to Strategy: What are the odds for future win-win scenarios in Afghanistan's Neighborhood?" is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) to develop and discuss likely scenarios for Afghanistan's neighbors, policy adjustments, and the need for a comprehensive strategy among European foreign policymakers. This brief is part of a series authored by Andrew Watkins and Dr. Timor Sharan to discuss the implications of the US withdrawal and the ongoing Afghan Peace Negotiations on existing policy tools, strategic interests, and challenges for key stakeholders in- and outside of Afghanistan. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

Russia has historically perceived Central Asia as within its sphere of influence and acted as the stabiliser in the region; instability has often corresponded with Russian lack of capacity or dedication of resources. The ousting of Kyrgyz prime minister Kubatbek Boronov by demonstrators in October 2020 is evidence of the fragility of these states and this relationship. Moscow's posturing as a superpower – reflective, if nothing else, of Russian self-perception in the emerging global order – suggests it will also protect these countries from security threats originating from Afghanistan. Indeed, over the past two decades, Russia's hands-off relationship with Afghanistan has been supplanted by an increasingly hands-on approach to assisting Central Asian states with their border security.

Moscow has enjoyed good relations with the Kabul government while supporting the Taliban with finances and arms and expanding its contacts with ethnoregional strongmen and elites in the country's north.² By playing all sides in the Afghan conflict, Russia aims to enhance its regional weight and ultimately protect its future security interests in the event of state collapse or a Taliban takeover.

Russia's future policy towards Afghanistan is intertwined in its complex geopolitical dynamics with the U.S., the EU, and Pakistan and its broader relations with China, Iran, and Central Asia. Russia's ties to and its intelligence agencies' cooperation with Iran in Afghanistan and beyond are likely to further complicate these dynamics. In part, Russia has pursued a rapprochement policy towards Pakistan to mitigate China's influence on the region through its relationship with Islamabad. Russia's relationship with China around crucial energy projects in Central Asia is another dynamic in play, albeit a constructive one so far.

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Possible Scenarios in Afghanistan: The view from Moscow

Moscow policy planners see Afghanistan's future in the following three broad scenarios in light of the outcome of ongoing negotiations and the scheduled U.S. military exit in 2021.

- **A Stable and Legitimate Government:** A scenario in which the Afghan state survives in its current form, and the Taliban is incorporated into the constitutional framework once NATO leaves. This scenario presents an excellent opportunity to international partners, including Moscow to consolidate stabilisation within the region and focus on regional economic and security cooperation and integration between Central Asia and South Asia, which would benefit all.
- **Stable, but NOT Appealing:** In this scenario, the moderate and reasonable government is dismantled. More aggressive and radical forces with no commitments to human rights and the existing constitution take over, most probably the Taliban with pockets of ISIS operations in different parts of the country. The EU and the U.S. are likely to shift their focus to development aid and diplomatic efforts. Russia's cosyng up to the Taliban and northern powerbrokers in Afghanistan might reduce security risks for Central Asia. Still, it might also lead to a range of other problems (e.g., drug trafficking, refugees).

Russian engagement with the Taliban and elements in the north is likely to increase fragmentation and unintentionally exacerbate the potential for civil war.

- **The Civil War Scenario:** In this scenario, NATO forces withdraw from Afghanistan, and regardless of the outcome of an ongoing peace settlement, the war continues. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the Afghan state collapse in the absence of American and European military and financial support. International donors would likely have little appetite to continue supporting the ANDSF. The U.S. is historically consistent in cutting back substantially on financial aid after withdrawing its military from a region or partnership. EU engagement might be limited to humanitarian aid. In this scenario, all-out war is expected, with regional players supporting competing local forces to enhance their geopolitical security interests. For Russia, the risk of destabilisation of Central Asia is vast. And yet, Russia has little appetite to fill in the gap by sending troops to Afghanistan, not just because of its failed experience in Afghanistan but because Moscow is already engaged on several fronts – Syria, Ukraine, and Libya – and lacks further resources. Russia's preferred strategy is likely to be containment of conflict within Afghanistan's geographical boundaries by sponsoring and arming strongmen in the north.

² Gibbons-Neff, T., (2017), "Russia Is Sending Weapons to Taliban, Top U.S. General Confirms", *The Washington Post*, 24 April 2017; Rowlatt, J., (2018), "Russia 'Arming the Afghan Taliban', Says US", BBC, 24 March 2018.

Finding Areas of Convergence

Afghanistan has every potential to become an arena for proxy power competition. This can be avoided if the EU, U.S., and Russia work jointly on potential issue-based areas of cooperation.

- **Regional Geopolitics:** There is real potential for the EU, U.S., and Russia to resolve Afghanistan's regional security complexities. However, they must show flexibility in looking beyond the horizon to the long game, shifting away from seeing Afghanistan through the lens of American security interests to turning the region into a hub of regional economic cooperation and convergence between Russia and Afghanistan and Central and South Asia.
- **Counterterrorism:** The counterterrorism agenda is a unifying area where EU, U.S., and Russian interests converge. Despite the discomfort, Russia could agree to a residual counterterrorism presence in Afghanistan.
- **Stability in Afghanistan:** the EU and Russia could work together to guarantee that an inclusive and stable government emerges after a peace settlement. The EU and Russia share the same concern about a sudden U.S. military exit in 2021, which could leave a vacuum for radical Islamist groups, including ISIS, to fill and expand their operations beyond Afghanistan.

Regardless of the outcome of the peace process, as Western presence and leverage diminish, we expect a more proactive Russia in Central Asia out of fear of spillover effects from Afghanistan. Russia has already taken "proactive measures" towards such an outcome by reinforcing Central Asian militaries' combat potential through the Collective Security Treaty Organization and has utilised the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Anti-Terrorist Structure, located in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to fight terrorism and drug networks in Central Asia. Russia has already established a military presence in three Central Asian countries and has, among other things, an aviation base in Kyrgyzstan.

Recommendations

- The EU should develop a strategy for consistent and meaningful issue-based engagement with Russia on Afghanistan, including vital common platforms such as counterterrorism and economic integration of Central and South Asia.
- Moscow can play an essential role in the ongoing peace process. Its rapprochement strategy towards Pakistan and its close relations with Iran should be capitalised on by the U.S. and EU countries supporting the peace process. Moscow should be treated more like an "equal" partner in the Afghan peace process and must be engaged with. However, given the scenarios mentioned above, Moscow may also spoil the process by prematurely recruiting regional strongmen-type figures to build a buffer zone around the northern border. Russia can use its leverage to change the incentive structure of the Taliban and other national stakeholders.
- The U.S. strategy of greater engagement with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in the Afghan peace process is encouraging. The EU and the U.S. should also encourage Russia to take a more active role in, and publicly offer its blessing to, the Afghan peace process.

About the authors

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About the cover photo

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and members of Taliban delegation take part in the multilateral peace talks on Afghanistan in Moscow, SERGEI KARPUKHIN / REUTERS

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