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Russia and Afghanistan: Between Fear and Opportunity

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Abstract

A mixture of fear and opportunity have motivated Russian government policies towards the new Taliban government in Kabul. Fears that the group will resume supporting international terrorist groups have declined, though worries persist that the group may not be able to constrain some extremists, who could be inspired by the Taliban victory in Afghanistan to promote Muslim militancy in Central Asia or the North Caucasus. Moscow also perceives opportunities to advance its economic and security interests in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Afghanistan in Russian/Soviet History

Afghanistan has long been of concern for Russian/Soviet geopoliticians, but Moscow's decision to invade the country in December 1979 marked a sharp departure from the previous strategy of employing primarily indirect tools of influence in Afghanistan. Faced with the collapse of a pro-Soviet Communist government in Kabul whose socialist modernization policies had antagonized traditional Muslims in Afghanistan, the Kremlin doubled down on its failing partner by combining a palace coup with massive military intervention. Though the Soviets committed 100,000 troops to support the Kabul regime, they could not defeat the highly motivated, ardently religious insurgents, who received substantial Chinese, Pakistani, and U.S. military assistance. The decade-long stalemate produced 13,000 Soviet military casualties and killed at least one million Afghans. After Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev ordered a military withdrawal in February 1989, the pro-Moscow regime in Afghanistan, then led by President Najibullah, managed to survive until 1992, due to continuing Soviet arms supplies and divisions among his opponents. When the insurgents finally entered Kabul, they fought viciously among themselves for control of the city and other parts of the country. By then, the Russian government had closed its Kabul embassy and effectively washed its hands of Afghanistan. After the extremist Taliban movement, supported by Pakistan's intelligence services, arose and defeated its rivals in most of the south and east of Afghanistan, the regime they established provided sanctuary and support to other Islamist groups, including Chechen militants and groups seeking to overthrow the secular regimes of Central Asian countries. Moscow responded by deploying the Russian Border Forces along Tajikistan's frontier with Afghanistan from 1994 to 2005 and providing military assistance to the so-called Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban coalition composed of ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. The latter established a de facto buffer zone

between northern Afghanistan and the Taliban forces in the rest of Afghanistan.

The U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom launched against the Taliban government and their al-Qaeda allies that began soon after the September 2001 terrorist attacks presented the Russian government with new opportunities and challenges. The swift demise of the Taliban was a boon to the Russian government, which was still struggling to suppress Muslim militancy in the North Caucasus. The Russian government did not openly oppose the Pentagon as it established military bases in Central Asia, though Russian officials made clear that they considered these facilities as temporary, and that they opposed an enduring NATO presence in Central Asia. At the end of December 2001, moreover, Moscow voted in favor of the UN Security Council Resolution that authorized an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to support the post-Taliban regime. Russia did not join ISAF, but did provide the new Afghan army with some defense supplies, education and training, and technical assistance, such as helping repair and upgrade Soviet-made military equipment. Moscow also reopened its Kabul Embassy. Furthermore, in 2008, Russia joined the so-called Northern Distribution Network, which NATO member states used to deliver supplies to Afghanistan through Russian territory (by air and rail through the Caucasus and Central Asia) to supplement the fragile logistical conduits through Pakistan. In turn, NATO established a Helicopter Maintenance Trust Fund Project to pay Russian companies to repair and sustain the Afghan Army's Soviet-origin helicopter fleet, which provided critical mobility and air support in the country's mountainous terrain. The NATO-Russia Council also sponsored a program whereby Russian and NATO governments trained hundreds of Afghan and Central Asian counternarcotics personnel. Relations between Moscow and the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai also blossomed. Additionally, Russian actors gingerly pursued

commercial opportunities in Afghanistan, selling fuel and restarting some Soviet-era projects like hydroelectric plants and irrigation systems. Along with this legal trade, however, Afghanistan also expanded exports of opium derivatives into Russia. This supply of narcotics, primarily heroin, resulted in more Russian deaths each year than had died during the decade-long Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan.

NATO's failure to suppress Afghan narcotics production and exports, along with its failure to consolidate the initial military victory and the general deterioration in Russian–Western relations, saw the Russian government grow increasingly dissatisfied with the ISAF mission. Russian policymakers faulted the United States and its allies for failing to suppress the Taliban insurgency or the massive production and export of Afghan opiates into Eurasia. Russian–NATO tensions were also rising at the same time with regard to the 2008 Georgian War, Russian efforts to eliminate the Western military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and NATO's refusal to deal directly with the Russian-led military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Through the CSTO and bilaterally, the Russian armed forces had increased their presence in the Central Asian countries north of Afghanistan during the 2000s. The Russian government, in 2012, extended its lease on a military base in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, for 30 more years and upgraded the equipment of its thousands of troops there as well as its presence in Kyrgyzstan.

Still, the Russian government continued to express alarm whenever NATO made preparations to remove its forces without completing its counterinsurgency mission. Russian representatives insisted that the Pentagon and its partners could not leave a security vacuum in the heart of Eurasia through a premature departure. In a January 2010 *New York Times* op-ed, Boris Gromov, who commanded the 40th Soviet Army in Afghanistan, and Russian Ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin expressed dissatisfaction “with the mood of capitulation at NATO headquarters.” They warned that, “[a] pull-out would give a tremendous boost to Islamic militants, destabilize the Central Asian republics and set off flows of refugees, including many thousands to Europe and Russia,” as well as worsen the regional narcotics problem. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen identified Afghanistan as presenting some of the best prospects for security cooperation between Russia and NATO, at least in the short term. Even the Russian seizure of Crimea in March 2014 and the subsequent aggression in eastern Ukraine, which resulted in the suspension of most military Russia–NATO cooperation, did not lead to a complete reversal of Moscow's stance with regard to the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Though critical of its performance, Russian diplo-

mats in the UN still regularly voted to renew the ISAF mandate. While Russia withdrew from the NDN in 2015, the diminishing size of the NATO force contingents in Afghanistan had already substantially diminished its logistical value and traffic.

Russia and the Taliban

From the mid-2010s onwards, some changes in Moscow's stance were evident. Most importantly, starting in 2015, Russian officials, such as Dmitry Zhirnov and Zamir Kabulov, began arranging regular contact with the Afghan Taliban. The stated reason for these exchanges between the Russian government and a terrorist organization according to Russian law was to share intelligence about the emerging Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan, the Islamic State Khorasan (or IS-K). Unlike the Taliban, the Islamic State has openly proclaimed the goal of overthrowing governments in Central Asia and incorporating these states' territory, as well as that of Afghanistan and the North Caucasus, into a renewed Muslim caliphate. The Islamic State was also a leading threat to the Russian-backed government in Syria. There were also unconfirmed media reports that some Russian entities were providing weapons to the Taliban and paid bounties for attacks on U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The outreach to the Taliban also allowed Moscow to hedge against a Taliban victory over the US-backed government.

Preferring a negotiated resolution of the war that would defuse the conflict and accelerate the removal of Western forces from Afghanistan, Russia joined other countries to promote a peace settlement. Russia led two different negotiating fora—the “Extended Troika” of Russia, China, the United States and Pakistan, along with the “Moscow Forum” of Russia, China, the United States, Pakistan, India, Iran, the five Central Asian countries, and various Afghan factions including the Taliban and the Kabul government. Furthermore, Russian diplomats cultivated several influential Afghan politicians and regional leaders whom they hoped would become *de facto* agents of influence. Whereas Moscow had maintained good ties with Karzai's government, which was one of the few governments to recognize Moscow's annexation of Crimea, Russia's relations with the government of President Ashraf Ghani that came to power in September 2014 were poor. Ghani opposed the Russian government's engagement with the Taliban and other Afghan leaders.

The Russian government appeared as surprised as their U.S. counterparts by the rapidity and comprehensiveness of the Taliban victory in 2021. Two days before the Taliban captured Kabul on August 15, Russia's Afghan Envoy Zamir Kabulov expressed doubt that Kabul would fall anytime soon. Russian policy-

makers would have preferred a military stalemate that would have allowed Russia to play off the competing Afghan groups. Still, many Russians welcomed the amplified U.S. humiliation in its longest war, with the entire enterprise abruptly collapsing. Putin crowed about how Afghanistan proved the futility of Western efforts to impose its values on other countries. He also gleefully recalled how the Soviet military withdrawal was much more orderly and how the government Moscow left behind lasted years rather than weeks. Other Russian officials commented to the media that Ukrainians should understand that NATO would abandon them just as they had the Afghans. The Russian government was one of the few to keep its embassy open after the Taliban took control of Kabul, praising the Taliban guards that ensured the security of Russia's diplomats. Unlike in the 1990s, Moscow did not support efforts to revive the Northern Alliance or other armed resistance to the Taliban, which soon collapsed.

That summer, Russian officials resisted the U.S. interest in re-establishing military bases in Central Asia for counterterrorism purposes in Afghanistan. The draft European security treaties proposed and published by Moscow in December would go further and oblige NATO to cease any security cooperation programs in Central Asia without Moscow's approval. Russian officials have also warned Central Asian governments not to support Western refugee repatriation efforts, claiming terrorists might exploit the opportunity to infiltrate the region, as well as Russia itself. Besides taking measures to keep NATO out of the region, the Russian government has responded to (and exploited) the Taliban threat to strengthen its bilateral alliances with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan; expand security ties with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan; and strengthen the political and military role of the Moscow-led CSTO in the region. Throughout 2021, these states engaged in a number of enhanced bilateral and multilateral security dialogues and military exercises. The internal upheavals in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, along with the fighting between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and between Armenia and Azerbaijan, have likely reinforced Russian uncertainty over the ability of the Central Asian regimes to manage the external repercus-

sions of the Taliban victory. Even if the Taliban does not directly support terrorists in other countries, their victory could inspire Islamists in other Eurasian countries.

Russian officials appear to believe that Taliban leaders are earnest in their commitment to constrain the IS-K and other terrorist groups that have an overt agenda of waging jihad beyond Afghanistan's borders. What they question is the leadership's ability to do so given the presence of more ideologically committed Taliban factions, such as the Haqqani Network and affiliated al-Qaeda fighters and the tenaciousness of the ISIL insurgency. They therefore want the Taliban to demonstrate that it can consolidate control over Afghanistan. As well as withholding international recognition and not delisting Taliban leaders from terrorist registries, Russian officials have supported international calls for the Taliban to pursue more inclusive policies that will make its regime more palatable to Afghans and foreign countries. They have also held Western countries responsible for the current socioeconomic chaos in Afghanistan. They have called on the United States and other Western countries to relax restrictions on providing funds to Afghan actors. Not only has Afghanistan's economic meltdown presented obstacles to the Taliban's consolidation of power, but it also increases the prospects that Afghans will cultivate more opium to earn money. Moscow, understandably, would like Western governments to pay the costs of restoring the Afghan economy.

Russia has also exploited the situation in Afghanistan to expand its influence beyond the country and its Central Asian neighbors. Moscow continues to host international meetings on Afghanistan. Prominent bilateral exchanges regarding Afghanistan have occurred with Pakistan, India, Iran, and China. Though U.S. President Joe Biden argued that withdrawing from Afghanistan would free up defense resources to counter China and Russia, Moscow has tried to leverage the crisis to consolidate Russian control over Central Asia and thereby empower its campaign to expand Russian influence over other former Soviet republics, such as Ukraine and potentially Georgia and Moldova. By deftly exploiting recent crises in Afghanistan and elsewhere, Putin has made substantial progress in restoring Russian influence.

About the Author

Richard Weitz is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Political-Military Analysis at Hudson Institute. His current research includes regional security developments relating to Europe, Eurasia, and East Asia as well as U.S. foreign and defense policies. Dr. Weitz has authored or edited several books and monographs, including *Assessing the Collective Security Treaty Organization* (2018).