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# CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM: THE PAST AND THE FUTURE OF MOSCOW-TALIBAN NEXUS



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# ABSTRACT



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## **Cautious Optimism: The Past and the Future of Moscow-Taliban Nexus**

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Took possession of Kabul in September 1996 and toppled by the US-led counter-terrorism operation following the 9/11 attacks, Taliban once again seized the power in the Afghan capital. Taking the advantage of the US withdrawal in mid-summer of 2021, conquering the strategic populous centers in a few days, the Taliban movement took down the NATO and the US-backed central government and began to control the entire country after a two-decade break.

The military progress of the movement, contrary to its first seizure in 1996, was accompanied by a comprehensive political and diplomatic initiative. In the aftermath of the US and Pakistani strikes resulted in the death of key Taliban political and military leaders; a new political process started in late 2016 with the participation of regional and global actors leading to unofficial recognition and legitimization of the Taliban. As a result of this diplomatic path, the US withdrawal and

Taliban's seizure of power has been de-facto "welcomed" by the international community.

This paper aims at analyzing Russia's controversial relations with the Taliban movement during the last twenty-five years; briefly focusing on the background of their ties in the first part, then elaborates the possible scenarios from the perspective of the Kremlin's interests and Russian foreign and security policy.

### **Hostility, terrorism, and recent detente through diplomacy**

Russian hostility toward the Taliban goes back to the Second Chechen War (1999 – 2009) in which the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan directly supported the Chechen separatists in financial, political and military terms: Taliban's representative in Pakistan announced the official recognition of Chechnya's independence and establishment of diplomatic relations with Maskhadov government in 1999; some Taliban circles pronounced the "jihad" against Russia in favor of Chechens; also various Russian reports informed the public on military camps training thousands of insurgent Chechens in

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Taliban controlled territories etc.

As a result of ongoing hostilities, Russian officials expressed the harmful pressure of the Taliban over its Central Asian neighbors and the possibility of launching Russian preventive strikes against "terrorist training bases" in Afghanistan during early 2000. The Kremlin supported the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and welcomed the Taliban regime's toppling by revenge motivated President George W. Bush and his neocons. Then, in the early 2000s, the Taliban had been banned by Russian judicial authorities, which is still valid and creates question marks in Russia's recent rapprochement toward the movement.

However, during the chaotic international circumstances accelerated by the so-called Arab Spring, Syrian internal war, and the surprising rise of ISIS, Russian officials began to express that "defeating the Taliban by military means is no longer an option." Russian ambassador in Tajikistan announced his country's contacts with Taliban's "moderate factions" in December 2015, and the Kremlin has organized meetings with mid-level Taliban officials in Russia and Tajikistan (at Russia's 201st division base). A key policymaker and

former Russian envoy in Kabul, Ambassador Zamir Kabulov, declared the Kremlin's readiness to establish direct contacts with the Taliban movement and no longer regard them as a terrorist organization in May 2016. Russia's détente policy was motivated by the Taliban's "national Afghan identity" when compared to the ISIS and al-Qaeda's transnational purposes and aiming at global jihad and establishing the Caliphate.

Although the Taliban movement had been banned officially in Russia, for the first time Taliban representatives attended negotiations on Afghanistan in Moscow during November 2018 with the Russian side headed by foreign minister Sergei Lavrov. Following this meeting, Russia's contacts remained at the foreign minister-level with the movement. Recently, during 2021, before and after the Taliban's seizure of power in Kabul, high-level Taliban representatives attended various negotiations in Moscow; as the last visit, an official Taliban delegation reached Moscow on 20 October 2021 to participate in the so-called Moscow format of talks on Afghanistan.

### **What about the future of the Kremlin-Taliban ties?**

Troubled background changing from mutual hostilities to recent diplomatic optimism and the cautious relationship between Moscow and the Taliban movement will shape two actors' bilateral and regional framework. At this point, three sets of dynamics would play a critical role: bilateral, regional and global/systemic circumstances.

#### *i) bilateral relations of Russia and Taliban:*

A few years ago, the Kremlin decided to establish diplomatic contacts with the since it came to a conclusion that Taliban would win the internal conflict in Afghanistan sooner or later.<sup>2</sup> Those contacts resulted in inclusion of Taliban in Russia-led multilateral negotiations (so-called Moscow format of talks) and granted a kind of facilitator (or mediator) role to the Kremlin –in addition to Pakistan.

Thanks to close bilateral ties, the Russian embassy in Kabul remained active even after the Taliban seized power in August 2021, which some

Russian observers evaluated as a test for the Taliban's new era. Russian ambassador in Kabul, Dmitry Zhirnov, had praised the Taliban warriors guarding the chancellery and keeping terrorists away from the embassy campus. As a result, that's not difficult to conclude the following: Moscow's attitude toward the Taliban has changed from jihadist discourse to common interests.

#### *ii) regional dynamics*

Moscow was among the losers' clubs in the 1996-2001 Taliban era, which created instability and a chaotic environment for neighboring Central Asian republics and Russia itself. While establishing close relations with the Taliban, the Kremlin aims at limiting the famous drug trafficking networks, massive migration of Afghans, and possible exportation of radical terrorist elements infiltrating into the northern neighbors.

Nearly four decades of experience of Russia on Islamic radicalism and Islamist groups' activism within the Syrian internal war context highlighted the difference between local and transnational Islamist networks for Russian policymakers. On the contrary to previous Taliban rule, the

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<sup>2</sup> Dmitry Trenin et al (2021), *Afghanistan under the Taliban: How the US, Europe and Russia react*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/18/afghanistan-under-taliban-pub-85168>

movement's current focus on internal affairs, active fight against the ISIS-linked groups inside the country and apparently distanced attitude on al-Qaeda contribute to the Kremlin-Taliban cooperation.

Russia also attaches great importance to regional efforts in terms of military and security cooperation. To achieve eliminating the possible threats emanating from the power transition in Afghanistan, the Kremlin has functionalized the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) with membering Central Asian republics – such as strengthening military bases hosted by those states, supporting the frontier guard institutions and organizing joint military drills- in particular with Tajikistan which shares an unstable border with Afghanistan.

*iii) global/systemic implications*

The total collapse of the Afghan government and state administration following the US withdrawal shocked the international community (including Russian policymakers); thus, reactions to the new Taliban era waved among regional and global powers. However, Russia did not hesitate to use that failed two-decade US operation and withdrawal from Afghanistan for

propaganda purposes; giving the message to the international community that the US is an unreliable ally and also reflecting domestic audience as proof of the unavertable decline of the US hegemony.

Russia has also been active in introducing the Taliban movement as a legitimate political actor achieving stability in Afghanistan through diplomatic channels. Moscow talks and the Taliban's high-level frequent visits highlighted Russia's key position within the international community and provided a ground to restore Russian soft power following its military interventions in Syria, Ukraine, and other troubled regions.

**What to expect now?**

1. Since 2015, Russia-Taliban relations and rapprochement policy benefited both sides; thus, one should expect an increasing trend in bilateral ties, also a possible deepening in commercial field and arms sale.

2. Russia clearly prefers local Islamist networks against transnational and Caliphate-motivated jihadist groups. Taliban also focuses on restoring its authority inside and would refrain from troubling regional actors by actively supporting transboundary

terrorist groups. That would guarantee the security dimension of Moscow-Taliban cooperation.

3. Central Asian republics are evaluated as influence zone for the Kremlin's foreign and security policy by the Russian public and Russia would deepen existing cooperation mechanisms within the context of regional security and military institutions –namely and most importantly, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

4. Russia would prefer to balance obvious Pakistani influence on the Taliban movement; thus, deepening collaboration with China and inclusion of India, particularly on the Afghanistan issue, would be possible alternatives for Moscow.

5. The US withdrawal granted fruitful leverage to both Russia and China to counterbalance the American interests in the heart of Asia. The current anti-Americanist trend within the Taliban would give an additional room to establish a Moscow-Kabul-Beijing axis to exclude the US and NATO from the regional security architecture. Within a few years, the Taliban government would be invited to the SCO activities to contribute to regional stability actively.

6. Taliban's restrained optimism in relations with Tehran also provides political leverage to both Moscow and Beijing in their collaboration of the so-called anti-American axis. However, Shiite-Sunni rivalry dynamics are still fragile in the region and would harm the current optimism in Iran-Taliban relations.