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RUSSIA AND AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE USA AND ITS ALLIES

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Russia and Afghanistan: Between Fear and Opportunity

By Richard Weitz, Hudson Institute, Washington, DC

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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

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The Rising Value of Russian Security Provision in Central Asia following the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

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Abstract

Politico-security support has always been a major element of Russia's relationship with most of the post-Soviet Central Asian republics. The U.S. withdrawal from, and the Taliban's seizure of control over most of, Afghanistan has thus likely increased its value in the eyes of the region's incumbent regimes. The Russian military's potential to deter armed groups considering an incursion into Central Asia also has value for extra-regional players, notably China.

The dramatic imagery and poignant human stories that dominated global media coverage of the chaotic final stage of the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, which played out against the backdrop of the Taliban's rapid seizure of Kabul, resonated around the globe in August 2021. This spectacle and storyline received significant attention in the Russian media, refracted through the—albeit faded—memory of the end of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, which imbued Afghanistan with great symbolic significance as a place in which the hubris of great powers comes unstuck. The speed and dramatic nature of these events nonetheless seemed to catch the Russian government off guard, like most of its counterparts around the world. And, like all governments that have some form of political, economic or security stake in Afghan stability and governance, the new politico-security situation has left Moscow to ponder various uncertainties and dilemmas. The prospect of ongoing internal armed political contestation and the economic impact of the abrupt end to international aid have generated fears about the rise of Islamic State (IS) affiliate groups and illegal opium trade networks, with negative potential consequences for Russia and the Central Asian republics.

Changes in political context that make challenges appear more urgent may serve as strategic resources through which actors can seek to address wider goals. The exacerbated concerns about potential spillovers from the instability in Afghanistan into post-Soviet Central Asia and beyond have served as a reminder of the Russian state's role as the primary external provider of hard security in the region. This role has significant value for the incumbent regimes in Central Asia and other actors with significant economic stakes in the region, most notably China. Of course, the fact that Russia can offer politico-military support vis-à-vis potential instability in Afghanistan does not necessarily mean that any of these actors will seek closer relations with the Russian government, since no such engagement takes place in

a political vacuum. The ramifications of the decision by the Putin regime to launch a military offensive against Ukraine in late February will likely impact on the role it is both able and permitted to play as a security provider in Central Asia.

Bulwark against Territorial Incursions and Regime Change

The prospect of prolonged internal instability, power struggles, and free reign for IS affiliate groups in northern Afghanistan presents a number of tangible security dilemmas for the Russian state. These threats are even more acutely felt in the Central Asian republics, three of which border northern Afghanistan. The memory of territorial incursions and raids by militant groups launched from northern Afghanistan into Uzbek and Kyrgyz territory in the late 1990s, as well as of the militants who operated between Afghanistan and Tajikistan during the Tajik Civil War earlier in that decade, remains relevant to these regimes' politico-security thinking. As such, cooperation in mitigating such risks represents an avenue through which the Russian government can consolidate its relationship with—and influence in—these states.

Albeit to differing extents, the Russian government has maintained strong ties with all the post-Soviet Central Asian republics since 1991. Within these relationships, securing the region's border with Afghanistan has always been relatively high on the agenda. However, the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, especially during the phase of greatest U.S. government and military engagement with the region in the mid-2000s, limited the value of the military support that the Russian government offered these regimes. The U.S. military withdrawal and the rapid re-emergence of almost country-wide Taliban control has likely served to recalibrate the Central Asian regimes's perceptions of the value of the politico-military support that the Russian government can provide.

The Russian military operates facilities on the territory of both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, maintaining

a troop presence at both sites. More significantly, the Russian government is credibly able to promise that it can, in a short timeframe, mobilise other military assets not otherwise available to the Central Asian regimes to counteract anything that the incumbent leaders interpret as a threat to their states or to the security of their regimes. This was illustrated on a small scale by the role that Russian military strategic transport, as well as civilian aircraft, played in evacuating not only Russian citizens, but also Tajik, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Uzbek citizens from Kabul as the Taliban reasserted its control over the Afghan capital in August 2021. The value of such rapid force deployment to the survival of the Central Asian regimes was likely also brought home to them by the (unrelated) rapid deployment of Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) troops to Kazakhstan amid internal unrest in early January 2022.

In the period surrounding and since the Taliban's return to power in late August 2021, the Russian military has been involved in a series of military exercises on the territory of three Central Asian republics. In August, the Russian military's 201st Motor Rifle Brigade, permanently based in Tajikistan, undertook first its own exercises and then joint exercises with the Tajik military. This was followed up by joint Russian–Uzbek exercises and, perhaps most notably, trilateral Russia–Uzbek–Tajik exercises along Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan. The holding of a trilateral exercise illustrates that the Russian government may be able to facilitate joint military activity, albeit very limited in scope, between the Central Asian republics, irrespective of the factious relationships between certain regimes. In each case, these military exercises were transparently aimed at developing joint readiness to repel militant incursions and, specifically, to deliver a clear political message to militant groups watching from the Afghan side of the border that any attempt to encroach on the territory of these states by force might be met by an overwhelming Russian military response.

Alongside exercises, the Russian government is funding the modernisation of its military base in Tajikistan and construction of a new border guard post for the Tajik border guard service in Shamsiddin Shohin. Both efforts to enhance security on the Tajik–Afghan border are understood as having taken on greater urgency in light of the risks posed by instability in Afghanistan.

Along similar lines, the Taliban's return to almost full control of Afghanistan served as a stimulus for the CSTO, the Russian-led military-security multilateral organisation aimed primarily at Central Asia. From its inception in the early 2000s, one of the CSTO's primary *raison d'être* has been to prevent instability in Afghanistan from spilling over into Central Asia. Although the CSTO has undertaken annual exercises aimed at coun-

teracting the flow of illegal narcotics from Afghanistan and its permanent forces have conducted exercises focused on military incursions from Afghanistan, the CSTO's functional role in counteracting Afghan spill-over has in practise been limited. As yet, the dramatic August 2021 events in Afghanistan have not changed that. The immediacy of the concerns these events generated have, however, served to animate the rhetorical rationale for the CSTO as a mechanism for coordinating a region-wide response to Afghan instability.

In early July, Tajikistan called on the CSTO to adopt measures that would increase Tajikistan's capacity to defend its southern borders. The Russian head of the CSTO Joint Staff responded that the CSTO has long supported the development of the Tajik border security service, which he claimed was capable of handling the current situation. However, it is possible that this request will kick-start the implementation of previously agreed—but long delayed—CSTO infrastructural development programs focused on Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan. Since August 2021, the CSTO has held multiple exercises on the Tajik–Afghan border, as well as in Kyrgyzstan, oriented toward counteracting militants. And in October 2021, the Russian deputy foreign minister, Andrei Rudenko, indicated that Russia would provide Tajikistan with “all necessary assistance [regarding the spillover of instability from Afghanistan]...., both within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and bilaterally.”

Although it already enjoyed strong ties with the Central Asian republics, the Russian government's strong show of military-backed political solidarity with the region's regimes since the U.S. withdrawal elevated their concerns about instability in Afghanistan is symbolically significant, coming as it does against the backdrop of a decade in which the Central Asian governments have established extensive ties with other external actors, primarily China. None of these other extra-regional actors currently offers the type of politico-military support that the Russian state—and the multilateral frameworks it leads—can. More importantly, Moscow can plausibly claim it is willing to provide such support, an offer that the incumbent regimes likely consider a necessary—if problematic—one amid concerns about the spread of militancy from Afghanistan that may manifest in challenges to their survival and state stability.

Distinct Roles of Russia and China towards the Same Aim in Central Asia

At present, the Russia government's material capability and willingness to provide direct military support—specifically to Tajikistan, but also to the other Central Asian republics—vis-à-vis insecurity in Afghanistan is likely regarded by most other external actors with interests in

Central Asia as a net benefit. Most notably, it remains unclear whether the Chinese state and state-backed companies that have made significant investments in infrastructure, energy, and businesses across the region are willing to intervene directly to protect these investments in the event of security breakdowns. Although it is developing a more direct military and security role in Tajikistan, the Chinese military still lacks the infrastructure necessary to react quickly to a major militant incursion from Afghanistan. To at least some degree, therefore, the Chinese government is content for the

Russian military to play such a role, as its main concern is maintaining political stability in the region to protect its financial investments, allow it to retain political influence within the Central Asian states, and prevent militants from infiltrating Xinjiang Province via Central Asia. Increased political influence for Moscow in Central Asia that results from the Russian military's role as the primary security guarantor against spillover from instability in Afghanistan is thus unlikely to concern Beijing unduly.

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ANALYSIS

A Resurgent Threat? Islamism in Central Asia since the Taliban Takeover

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Abstract

The article discusses the danger of militant Islamism spreading to Central Asia from Afghanistan against the background of the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. It argues that although that danger has increased, the threat ultimately remains limited because the Taliban's attention is on Afghanistan and more radical and transnational armed groups in Afghanistan, such as the Islamic State, have been weakened in recent years.

The Taliban conquered half of Afghanistan in July 2021. By mid-August, they had occupied Kabul, forcing pro-American Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to flee to the United Arab Emirates. The takeover happened even before the US completed its withdrawal. Kabul had been worse than Saigon.¹

Despite their shock at the rapid collapse, few Western, Russian or other observers and policymakers had doubted that the Taliban would ultimately achieve victory in Afghanistan. Ghani's regime had suffered from endemic corruption, dependence upon Western military and economic support, and weak political legitimacy—and, overall, was unable to guarantee Afghans' security and improve their livelihoods. To many Afghans fatigued by years of war, the Taliban appeared no better or worse than the pro-US authorities. As the Taliban marched on the capital, few—even among the pro-Ghani military, militias, and local authorities—rose to fight them.

The Taliban's victory profoundly modified the geopolitical context in Central and South Asia. It was, however, a change for which regional powers had been preparing for some time. In the 1990s, Russia, Iran, India, and the five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) had backed the Northern Alliance—a coalition of Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara (Afghan Shia) armed groups led by Ahmad Shah Masoud—against the Taliban. The Taliban, for its part, had harbored al-Qaeda, threatened to export militant Islamism to destabilize its neighbors, and was one of just two governments ever to recognize Chechnya's independence. Moscow had thus threatened the Taliban with airstrikes even before 9/11. When the US intervened in Afghanistan, Russia and the Central Asian states (almost) wholeheartedly supported it. This support, however, turned lukewarm by the 2010s: Russia and its allies resented the US foreign policy of pro-

¹ <https://theconversation.com/from-saigon-to-the-mujahideen-the-many-historical-echoes-of-the-fall-of-kabul-166600>.

moting regime change in the Middle East and the post-Soviet space and considered that Washington was not up to the task of stabilizing Afghanistan.

Against this backdrop, and as the US started negotiating with the Taliban after 2010, Russia, the Central Asian states, and other regional powers also reached out to them to prepare for the future. Their relations with the Pashtun-dominated movement did not have to be as conflictual as in the 1990s, the logic went. If the Taliban guaranteed inclusivity, notably regarding ethnic minorities, and did not support Islamists in the post-Soviet space, a mutually beneficial relationship could be forged.² China operated according to a similar logic, preparing to deal with the Taliban if they agreed not to meddle in Xinjiang. Both Russia and China therefore kept their embassies in Kabul open following the Taliban takeover.

Despite the Taliban's apparent readiness to provide the necessary guarantees, however, two main limits have surfaced. First, the Taliban's rise to power did not come after a political deal with Ghani's regime brokered in Doha or in Moscow, but after their military victory. This has reduced the regional powers' ability to pressure the Taliban into accepting a more inclusive and less radical government. Second, given the chaos that has engulfed Afghanistan, it is unclear whether the Taliban can provide stability and limit the militancy of rival groups such as the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan. These factors raise the possibility of militant Islamism spreading from Afghanistan to Central Asia.

Militant Islamism in Central Asia

Wedged between Russia, China, Iran, Afghanistan, and the Caspian Sea, Central Asia has been affected by political, economic, and security issues since the Soviet breakup in 1992. Headed by authoritarian rulers, the region's states face endemic corruption, cronyism, stunted economies, political and economic dependence on Russia and China, forms of regional and kin/clan competition among elites, and transnational tensions over the control of water resources and border delimitations. While Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan have generally fared better than Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan thanks to the presence of natural resources, including oil and gas, on the territory of the former, all five Central Asian regimes are fundamentally unstable. They have all witnessed episodes of political violence since independence, even if only Tajikistan has had a full-blown civil war. As exemplified by the current protests in Kazakhstan, contestation may ignite in even the seemingly most stable of the region's countries.

Among the drivers of conflict in Central Asia, militant Islamism occupies a special place. While Islam had been confined to the private sphere in Soviet times, the region saw a re-Islamisation in the 1990s. Mosques multiplied and many Central Asians started regularly and publicly engaging in rituals and practices associated with the faith. Islam came to occupy a prominent social space, but—counter to the predictions made by Western pundits during the Cold War—it seldom became an ideology for political contestation. Instead of Islamism overtaking the region, Central Asia saw communist authorities cloak themselves in nationalism and Islam to conduct a soft transition from the USSR to independence. Promoting what they labelled “traditional Islam,” these new-old leaders wanted a religion that would be in supposed symbiosis with local traditions; tolerant of diverse Islamic practices, including Sufism; and, most of all, loyal to the secular authorities. In fact, they made increasingly clear that there would be no tolerance for even non-militant Salafi movements advocating either for Central Asia's Islamic renovation or—worse—for a theocratic regime. To date, local authoritarian rulers see Islamism as a threat, fearing it could become a rallying point for people dissatisfied with them.

In regions where Islamism was stronger in Soviet times, the 1990s saw clashes between militant Islamists and the secular authorities. In Tajikistan, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) participated in the civil war (1992–1997), supporting one of the regional coalitions vying for power. In the peace deal that ended the conflict, the IRPT secured legal status, becoming the only official Islamist party in Central Asia. In 2015, as Tajik authorities cracked down on Islamists, it was, however, banned as an alleged terrorist organization.

In Uzbekistan, militant Islamist movements sprouted in the town of Namangan in the Fergana Valley amid the growing influence of Saudi preachers and local Salafis. Since they contested the control of the central authorities, Namangan's Islamists were crushed in 1992. Their leaders, Jumaboi Khojayev (Juma Namangani) and Tohir Yuldashev (Yo'ldosh), however, moved to Tajikistan and then to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where they linked up with Osama bin Laden. In 1998, after the Tajik civil war, Namangani and Yo'ldosh formed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Following terrorist activities in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, IMU was definitively pushed out into Afghanistan by 2000–2001. After the US intervention in Afghanistan, it fought alongside the Taliban and often aligned with its more radical wings, such as the Haqqani Network. IMU suffered heavy losses in the early years of the conflict but managed to replenish its forces and gain influence

2 <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20211229/bolshoe-intervu-zamir-kabulov-1044512128.html>

in the northern, Uzbek areas of Afghanistan. By 2014, IMU, having lost its historical leaders, aligned with IS, confirming its radicalism. In engagements with the Taliban, it again suffered considerable losses before splintering into pro-IS and pro-Taliban factions. To date, IMU's strength is difficult to gauge, but it has been weakened and likely has only limited ability to influence Central Asia. Given that it left the region some twenty years ago, IMU's support in Central Asia is also limited. Still, this does not mean that IMU militants could not theoretically conduct attacks or find supporters there.

Other Islamist groups have been present in Central Asia. Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) has support in the region, especially in the Fergana Valley and Uzbekistan. Although it has similar political goals to the militant Islamists, HT has stayed away from institutional militancy. Its supporters have nonetheless engaged at times in violent actions. Across Central Asia, the actual support enjoyed by HT is difficult to gauge, but it is generally seen to be sizable, in the thousands of people.³ Local authorities consistently blame the group for popular protests and violence, albeit with little evidence. Infamously, the Uzbek authorities sanctioned the killing of hundreds of protesters in the town of Andijan in 2005 while accusing them of being HT members supported by IMU.

One sign of the potency of militant Islamism in Central Asia is the high number of people who have left to join IS and al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq. One estimate indicates that over 500 fighters from Kazakhstan, over 500 from Kyrgyzstan, over 1,500 from Uzbekistan over 1,300 from Tajikistan, and over 400 from Turkmenistan had traveled there as of late 2016. The overall number is thus roughly equivalent to the number of fighters from the entire European Union.⁴ Although numbers are patchy, hundreds of Central Asian women and children have also relocated to the Middle East. The egalitarian, prosperous, and uncorrupted religious utopia that IS promised evidently appealed to many Central Asians. While hundreds of them have since returned to Central Asia and may sympathize with Afghan Islamists, including ISKP,⁵ the majority of Central Asian militant Islamists were killed in the Middle East. This seriously weakened Islamism's contestation potential in the region. Importantly, the same is true for Russia. Over 3,400 Russians left to fight in Syria and Iraq, an exodus that weakened militant Islamism in Russia despite IS creating its own affiliate in the North Caucasus in 2015.

The Taliban and the Islamic State in Afghanistan

Since August 2021, the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated considerably, leading the UN to request a record US\$5 billion in humanitarian aid for 2022. Beyond this, the Taliban's rule has to date been marked by governmental reshufflings, a lack of political inclusivity toward minorities, a retreat on women's rights, and attacks on former security officials and ethnic minorities.⁶ To date, it remains unclear whether the Taliban will be able to administer the country, control its borders, provide services to the population, restore the economy, and prevent countrywide famine. Importantly, the Taliban's attitude toward humanitarian aid from Western organizations has yet to be clearly articulated.

As it tries to stabilize Afghanistan, the Taliban will need broad international support. In exchange for that and for diplomatic recognition, it will probably need to commit to respecting to some extent minorities and women's rights, curtailing opiate production, and reining in other militant Islamist groups that want to conduct attacks abroad. The Taliban's own fragmentation—the movement includes such groups as the Haqqani Network and IMU—and the emergence of ISKP will render tackling these challenges more difficult. If it is unable to keep its end of the bargain, the Taliban will face opposition from the US and regional powers that will want to deal with existing security threats themselves. A diplomatic isolation of Afghanistan and/or meddling in its affairs, including through drone strikes on ISKP, would, however, further undermine the Taliban's rule and worsen the humanitarian situation.

ISKP's strength grew tremendously in Afghanistan between 2014 and 2018. The group conducted hundreds of attacks on civilians, the Taliban, and pro-US forces, relying on suicide and indiscriminate tactics. As in the Middle East, it targeted Shia Muslims to foster sectarian conflict.⁷ ISKP hence emerged as a radical militant Islamist alternative to the Taliban. Promoting the transnational idea of the Khorasan, eyeing other Muslim regions for expansion, and relying on Pakistani and international recruitment, ISKP challenged the Taliban's Afghan-centric nature and Afghan Pashtun membership. It also condemned the Taliban for the latter's negotiations with the US. The group has, however, suffered heavy losses and lost its strongholds in Afghanistan between 2018 and 2020.⁸ Judging by its reduced rate

3 https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/127809/doc_asia_26.pdf

4 <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>

5 <https://bulaninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Report-on-Repatriation-in-Central-Asia-2.pdf>

6 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/5025/2021/en/>

7 <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>

8 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/hit-from-many-sides-2-the-demise-of-iskp-in-kunar/>

of attacks, it has been further weakened by the Taliban takeover. It has not, however, been annihilated—notably, it struck high-profile targets in Kabul in summer and fall 2021—and may be able to renew its strength with fighters coming from and through Pakistan. While it may be interested in attacking targets in Central Asia and Russia, there is no indication that ISKP currently sees this as a priority or can strike there with or without IMU's support. As it is now under heavy pressure from the Taliban, it will likely have fewer opportunities to divert resources to attacks abroad.

Since August 2021, a few thousand Afghan refugees have fled to Central Asia, mostly to Tajikistan.⁹ Tajikistan was also the only Central Asian country initially open to backing an Afghan opposition. For Emomali Rahmon, who has ruled in Dushanbe since the civil war, this seemed like a way to use pan-Tajik solidarity to divert attention from the popular discontent with his regime. That being said, he never truly considered supporting the opposition.¹⁰ Indeed, despite its pan-Tajik rhetoric, Tajikistan deported many refugees.

Other Central Asian states and Russia appeared ready to deal with the Taliban and showed even less interest in accepting refugees. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan thus reopened their borders for trade with Afghanistan in fall 2021. These positive attitudes may, however, change if the Taliban supports Islamists in Central Asia or is unable to stabilize the security and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, causing the flow of refugees to increase. In such scenarios, the threat of Islamist militants penetrating Central Asia would also increase. Testifying to such concerns, the Russian and Tajik presidents reiterated their ongoing military co-operation on the Tajik–Afghan border during a December 2021 meeting.¹¹

Finally, for all post-Soviet countries, the issue of Afghan opiate trafficking via the so-called “northern route” running through the Fergana Valley to Russia remains important. To date, it is unclear how drug and other criminal networks will be reconfigured following

the Taliban takeover, but this, too, may increase volatility in the region and lead to the penetration of militants.

An Overestimated Threat

Observers have speculated about an Islamist threat posed by Afghanistan to Central Asia since the Soviet–Afghan War. That threat has, however, never materialized—at least not beyond the anti-communist Mujahideen's few cross-border attacks in the late 1980s and half-hearted support for the Tajik Islamists during the Tajik civil war. Today, similar claims about militant Islamists targeting Central Asia and finding support there among local Salafis have come to the fore. Now, as before, this threat seems overestimated and appears to be mostly used by local authoritarian rulers to quell dissent.

Because the Taliban, a Pashtun-centric movement, has never wanted to expand to Central Asia, the threat to the region comes mainly from ISKP and IMU. These two groups did not, however, conduct attacks there at the peak of their strength in 2017–18. At present, they are weakened and locked in a battle for survival with the Taliban, which, ironically, has the support of the international community against them and largely controls Afghanistan's borders. It will be a long time before ISKP or IMU can divert resources to the post-Soviet space. Beyond this, even for ISKP, focusing on Central Asia would be challenging and counterproductive. The region is under the Russian security umbrella, has seen no major Islamist militancy in recent years, has an average quality of life significantly higher than Afghanistan and South Asia, and is likely not to be welcoming to Pakistani and Arab militants. It also holds limited strategic value compared to expanding operations to South and Southeast Asia. Hence, although there is a danger that Afghan militant Islamists will try to destabilize Central Asia, the real threats to the region's stability come from its endogenous issues, as shown by the current upheaval in Kazakhstan.

About the Author

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9 <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/85612>

10 <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/85223>

11 <https://news.ru/cis/putin-obespokoilsya-situaciej-na-afgansko-tadzhikistanskoj-granice/>

OPINION POLL

The Significance of Afghanistan for the Russian Population: The Most Important Events of 2021

Figure 1: Which of the Events of the Year 2021 Listed Below Are in Your Opinion the Most Important Events? (%)



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 25 November – 1 December 2021, published on 29 December 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/12/29/sobytie-chelovek-film-i-serial-2021-goda/>

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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