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Russia's Concerns and Engagement in Afghanistan

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Russia has been a major actor in the region since the 19th century. The confrontation between Russia and Britain in the 19th century and the faceoff between the Soviet Union and the US in the 20th century have left an indelible footprint in the contemporary history of Afghanistan. Since the dawn of the 21st century, too, Russia has emerged as a key actor in the region and continues to play a crucial role in Afghanistan's security.

Afghanistan shares no borders with Russia but it shares borders with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which were formerly the territories of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Given how these countries share borders with Russia, Moscow views these Central Asian countries as its backyard, and thus its focus on regional stability includes the security of their borders with Afghanistan along its northern flank.² In this regard, Russia also maintains military presence in the Central Asian countries that share borders with Afghanistan.³

In the 18 years since the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan has been insecure initially because of the Taliban's resurgence and recently because of the presence and activities of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) militants. As of 2016, there are approximately 2,500 ISKP combatants in Afghanistan, and while Russia's engagement with Afghanistan has a long

1. Farah Elyaskhil has worked in various capacities at Afghanistan's Independent Directorate of Local Governance.

2. Rauf, Sarwat. "Changing Geopolitical Dynamics in Central Asia: Causes and Effects." Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, September 01, 2018. http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/9-SS_Sarwat_Rauf_No-4_2017.pdf

3. Putz, Catherine. "Russia's Bulwark on the Afghan Border: Tajikistan." *The Diplomat*, May 30, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/russias-bulwark-tajikistan-on-the-afghan-border/>

history, the rise of the Islamic State's activity in Afghanistan has further prompted Russia to become more concerned about stability in the region.⁴ Although the precise numbers of ISKP combatants is unclear, official Russian estimates⁵ have pitted it at approximately 5000 in northern Afghanistan, in 2019, and according to the 2019 High-Risk List report by the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the group poses a greater threat to the Afghan people than it did in 2016.⁶

In this context, this essay contextualizes Russia's concerns regarding insecurity in Afghanistan. The first section explores Moscow's interests in Afghanistan's security and peace in the recent years. The second section discusses the rationale of its engagement with the Taliban. The final section elaborates on the role Russia can play towards bringing about a regional consensus on peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan-Russia Relations Post 2001

When the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001, Russia supported the US in Afghanistan because "their interests were largely aligned,"⁷ and both countries wanted "to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a haven for terrorists."⁸ After the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Russia resumed its diplomatic mission with the subsequent Afghan government in 2001. In 2002, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov visited Afghanistan and pledged to help Afghanistan with arms and other military equipment, as well as to help train officers of the nascent Afghan army.⁹ Between 2002 and 2009, Russia delivered free military hardware, training and logistical services totaling USD 109 million.¹⁰

4. "Rise of ISIS in Afghanistan is threat to Russia – Moscow." September 13, 2016. <https://www.rt.com/news/359220-russia-afghanistan-us-isis/>

5. "FSB chief warns that 5,000 terrorists concentrated by CIS borders with Afghanistan." Russian News Agency, May 21, 2019. <https://tass.com/politics/1059207>

6. "2019 High-Risk List". SIGAR, 2019. https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/spotlight/2019_High-Risk_List.pdf

7. Julia, Gurganus. "Russia's Afghanistan Strategy." Foreign Affairs, January 02, 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2018-01-02/russias-afghanistan-strategy>

8. Ibid.

9. "Russia Defense Minister Arrives in Kabul." VOA News, September 06, 2002. <https://www.darivoo.com/a/a-48-a-2002-09-06-2-1-94057264/1420514.html>

10. Brattvoll, Joakim. "Is Russia back in Afghanistan?" Peace Research Institute Oslo, April, 2016. <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/PRIO-%20Is%20Russia%20Back%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf>

After 2006, when the Taliban increased their military activities, Russia gradually began to seek ways to respond to the looming threat to the security of Central Asia from an unsecure Afghanistan. Hinting a divergence of interests with the US in Afghanistan, Russia supported Afghan President Hamid Karzai while condemning the US and NATO for their failure to counter the Taliban and curb drug trafficking.¹¹ As US–Afghanistan relations soured after the 2009 presidential elections in Afghanistan and the then Afghan President Karzai grew critical of US policies in Afghanistan, the relations between Afghanistan and Russia began to strengthen.¹² Some of the key milestones that dot this trajectory of relations include the Karzai-Dmitry Medvedev letters which became public in January 2010,¹³ as well as Karzai’s attendance of the Sochi Olympics in February 2014 which many other countries had boycotted.¹⁴

Relations between Russia and Afghanistan continued strengthen post the Karzai administration and during the tenure of the incumbent National Unity Government (NUG) (2014-2019). Soon after taking office, Afghanistan’s President Ashraf Ghani met his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, during the 2015 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit and discussed stabilization of Afghanistan and fighting terrorism.¹⁵ Later, the same year, reports revealed that President Ghani had requested Russia military assistance including artillery, small arms and Mi-35 choppers.¹⁶ Subsequently, in April 2017, it was reported that Afghanistan had asked Russia for military supplies and training for the military and police.¹⁷

11. Menkiszak, Marek. “Russia’s Afghan Problem: The Russian Federation and the Afghanistan Problem Since 2001.” Centre for Eastern Studies, September, 2011. http://aei.pitt.edu/58389/1/prace_38_en_0.pdf

12. Brattvoll, Joakim. “Is Russia back in Afghanistan?” Peace Research Institute Oslo, April, 2016. <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/PRIO-%20Is%20Russia%20Back%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf>

13. Ruttig, Thomas. “From Point Zero to ‘New Warmth’: Russian-Afghan relations since 1989.” Afghanistan Analysts Network, August 08, 2014. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/from-point-zero-to-new-warmth-russian-afghan-relations-since-1989/>

14. Brattvoll, Joakim. “Is Russia back in Afghanistan?” Peace Research Institute Oslo, April, 2016. <https://www.prio.org/utility/DownloadFile.ashx?id=21&type=publicationfile>

15. Ibid.

16. Sonawane, Vishakha. “Afghanistan Seeking Artillery, Mi-35 Helicopters from Russia amid growing insurgency: report.” International Business Times, October 26, 2015. <https://www.ibtimes.com/afghanistan-seeking-artillery-mi-35-helicopters-russia-amid-growing-insurgency-report-2155655>

17. “Afghanistan asks Russia for support in supplies and training for military.” Russia Beyond, April 16, 2017. https://www.rbth.com/news/2017/04/16/afghanistan-asks-russia-for-support-in-supplies-and-training-for-military_743721

Russia's Primary Concerns Pertaining to Afghanistan

With an increase in the presence of the ISKP in Afghanistan during 2015 and 2016, Moscow grew concerned about potential spillover effects as it shares borders with Central Asian countries. In this regard, Russia approached the Taliban to join forces against the ISKP.¹⁸ On the other hand, severe apprehensions regarding extremism also exist in Uzbekistan, and the links between these extremist groups such as the Islamic Jihad Union¹⁹ and ISKP in Afghanistan also feed into Russia's fears.²⁰ Some have argued that such threats are "overblown" by Russia to trouble the US in Afghanistan.²¹ The implication of those arguments is that Afghanistan does not pose any direct short or long term security threat to Russia.²²

Another concern Russia has often raised is that of drug trafficking in Central Asia, originating from Afghanistan. Moscow views it as a threat to its national security on the grounds that it fuels terrorism in Central Asia.²³ Moreover, Afghan drugs reach Russian markets through Central Asian countries.²⁴ According to reports, consumption of illicit drugs kills 70,000 people in Russia each year.²⁵ Afghanistan produces 90% of the world's opium,²⁶ most of which is cultivated in Taliban controlled/dominated areas. In this regard, Russia has criticized NATO's efforts towards combating narcotics

18. Scott Worden. "How to Stabilize Afghanistan: What Russia, Iran and the United States Can Do." *Foreign Affairs*, April 26, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2017-04-26/how-stabilize-afghanistan>

19. Ali, Obaid. "New Confusion About ISKP: A case study from Sar-e Pul." *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, September 07, 2018. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/new-confusion-about-iskp-a-case-study-from-sar-e-pul/>

20. Shlapentokh, Dmitry. "The ISIS threat and Moscow's influence in Central Asia and the Middle East." *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, November 06, 2015. <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13297-the-isis-threat-and-moscows-influence-in-central-asia-and-the-middle-east.html>

21. Scott Worden. "How to Stabilize Afghanistan: What Russia, Iran and the United States Can Do." *Foreign Affairs*, April 26, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2017-04-26/how-stabilize-afghanistan>

22. Ramani, Samuel. "Russia's Anti-Drug Crusade in Afghanistan." *The Diplomat*, December 28, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/russias-anti-drug-crusade-in-afghanistan/>

23. *Ibid.*

24. Trenin, Dmitri; Kulakov, Oleg; Malashenko, Alexey; and Topychkanov, Petr. "A Russian strategy for Afghanistan after the coalition troop withdrawal." *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 2014. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMC_Article_Afghanistan_Eng14.pdf

25. *Ibid.*

26. Bjelica, Jelena. "AAN Q&A: An established industry-Basic facts about Afghanistan's opium-driver economy." *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 11, 2017. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/aan-qa-an-established-industry-basic-facts-about-afghanistans-opium-driven-economy/>

production and trafficking in Afghanistan as being inadequate.²⁷

Russia's Engagement with the Taliban

Moscow's first contact with the Taliban was established in 1995 when a Russian helicopter carrying armaments was forced to land in Kandahar by the Taliban. Russia's representative, Zamir Kabulov—who is currently the Russian president's special envoy to Afghanistan—met the then chief of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, to discuss the release of the seven Russian pilots.²⁸

In 2007, Moscow initiated communications with the Taliban leadership to discuss, among other issues, drug trafficking through Central Asian countries which share borders with Afghanistan. In the recent years, however, Russia's contacts with the Taliban have not been limited to addressing drug trafficking. Nonetheless, Russian diplomats have maintained that their contacts with the Taliban are limited to peace negotiations, containing the ISKP's threat to Russia's stability, and to address Russia's concerns that Afghanistan will become another Iraq since the U.S. has failed in Afghanistan.²⁹

Since late 2016, there have been accusations that Russia has been providing arms to the Taliban in northern Afghanistan.³⁰ In July 2016, CNN quoted two Taliban representatives claiming that Russia supplied the group with guns via Iran.³¹ While Russia strongly rejected the claims in this news report,³² in December 2016, Russia's Ambassador to Afghanistan, Alexander Mantytskiy, confirmed that his country maintained ties with the Taliban but that it was only to ensure protection of Russia's political offices in Afghanistan.³³ He

27. Ramani, Samuel. "Russia's Anti-Drug Crusade in Afghanistan." *The Diplomat*, December 28, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/russias-anti-drug-crusade-in-afghanistan/>

28. Wahdatyar, Hashim. "4 Reasons Russia Increasingly Favors the Taliban in Afghanistan." *The Diplomat*, February 14, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/02/4-reasons-russia-increasingly-favors-the-taliban-in-afghanistan/>

29. Saifullah, Masood. "Why is Russia so interested in Afghanistan all of a sudden?" *Deutsche Welle*, March 01, 2017. <https://www.dw.com/en/why-is-russia-so-interested-in-afghanistan-all-of-a-sudden/a-36989680>

30. Worden, Scott. "How to Stabilize Afghanistan: What Russia, Iran and the United States can do." *Foreign Affairs*, April 26, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2017-04-26/how-stabilize-afghanistan>

31. Ramani Samuel, "Understanding the Russia-Taliban Connection." *The Diplomat*, August 04, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/understanding-the-russia-taliban-connection/>

32. *Ibid.*

33. Ahmadi, Shabir. "Envoy Confirms Russia Has Relations with Taliban." *Tolo News*, December 8, 2016. <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/envoy-confirms-russia-has-relations-taliban>

also voiced Russia's deep concerns about terrorist groups like ISKP in Afghanistan.³⁴ It is also reported that Russian representatives have met the Taliban in Moscow and Tajikistan, and have held discussions regarding helping the Taliban with Pakistan and Iran.³⁵ There are several reports indicating that Russia and the Taliban shared intelligence in the fight against ISKP.³⁶ Such relations between Russia and the Taliban send a strong message to the U.S. and its allies, reminding them that Moscow is still interested in Afghanistan and the region. Moreover, Russia intends to strengthen its role and counter the NATO and U.S. interests in the region.

Russia and a Regional Consensus for Peace and Stability in Afghanistan

Russia has the potential to play a constructive role towards fostering peace and stability in Afghanistan. The possibilities that can be harnessed in this regard include Russia's influence among regional countries playing a crucial role in the Afghan conflict; Russia's relations with the Taliban; and multilateral platforms including the SCO, the Kabul Process for Peace and Stability in Afghanistan, and the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process.

Firstly, Russia enjoys influence over some of the primary parties to the Afghan conflict: Iran, Pakistan and India. In February 2017, Moscow organized a trilateral meeting on Afghanistan which was attended by Russia, China and Pakistan, and which later gained Iran's support. Moscow has also hosted two meetings involving Pakistan and China to discuss settlement to the Afghan issue. At the first peace conference in Moscow in 2018, Russia invited India. All these indicate that Russia is undertaking efforts to play a bolder role in Afghanistan's peace.³⁷ Such efforts, however, have not been concerted and regular, and have been largely hued by the rivalry between the U.S. and Russia.³⁸

34. Ibid.

35. Worden, Scott. "How to Stabilize Afghanistan: What Russia, Iran and the United States can do." *Foreign Affairs*, April 26, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2017-04-26/how-stabilize-afghanistan>

36. Todd, Brian, and Almas, Steve. "Russia, Taliban share intelligence in fight against ISIS." *CNN*, December 25, 2015. <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/24/europe/putin-taliban-isis/>

37. Saber, Zenat, and Qazi, Sheerena. "Afghan peace conference: India shares table with Taliban." *Al Jazeera English*, November 09, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/afghan-peace-conference-india-shares-table-taliban-181109092419577.html>

38. "Afghan politicians, Taliban representatives to hold peace talks in Moscow." *TASS*, February 05, 2019. <http://tass.com/world/1043226>

Russia is of the opinion that the US intends to “monopolize” the talks with the Taliban and conduct it in secrecy, keeping the regional countries “in the dark.”³⁹ To take stock of Russia’s influence in the region and to direct it towards a regional consensus for security in Afghanistan, the Afghan government needs to ensure that its interests remain independent of the global rivalries between the US and Russia.

Second, Russia can use its links and influence with the Taliban to convince them to engage in a constructive political settlement with the Afghan government. There are indications that Russia intends to play such a role. It hosted the Moscow talks with the Taliban in November 2018. At this interaction, the Taliban sent five representatives who were joined by representatives from Iran, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, China, India and the US. The Afghan government, however, did not participate in the conference as the Taliban refused to hold direct talks with the Afghan government.⁴⁰ In February 2019, Russia hosted another meeting attended by a Taliban delegation and influential political figures from Afghanistan in the absence of representatives from the Afghan government. In response, the Afghan government announced that the Afghan participants did not have the executive authority and no decision will be taken without the consent of the Afghan people.⁴¹

Third, multilateral platforms including the SCO, the Kabul Process and the Istanbul Process provide solid grounds for bilateral security cooperation between Afghanistan and Russia and for multilateral security cooperation between the regional countries with regard to Afghanistan’s security. Russia is one of the founding and powerful members of the SCO, and can therefore play a constructive role in bringing about a regional consensus aimed at security cooperation in Afghanistan among the SCO members. The Kabul Process for Peace and Security in Afghanistan is another such platform. The declaration of the second meeting of the Kabul Process, held in Kabul on in

39. Bezhan, Frud. “Explainer: why there are two competing tracks for Afghan peace.” Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, February 07, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/explainer-afghan-peace-process-two-tracks/29757472.html>

40. Kiselyova, Maria. “Taliban attends peace talks in Moscow for first time, no progress reported.” Reuters, November 09, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-afghanistan-taliban-idUSKCN1NE159>

41. “Taliban hold rare talks with senior Afghan politicians in Moscow.” PressTV, February 06, 2019. <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2019/02/06/587796/Taliban-hold-rare-talks-with-senior-Afghan-politicians-in-Moscow>

February 2018, stressed on the resolve of the participating members to jointly address the threats posed by Transnational Terrorist Networks (TTNs), as well as Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs). All the participating members, including Russia, have committed to security cooperation and counter-terrorism.⁴² The Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process is the third multilateral platform for security cooperation between Afghanistan, Russia and regional countries. As a participating country, Russia can advance motions for regional security cooperation under this framework, and simultaneously strengthen its security cooperation bilaterally with Afghanistan under the same framework. All declarations of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process place significance on security and counterterrorism cooperation in Afghanistan.⁴³

Conclusion

After the fall of Taliban following the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, Russia cooperated in securing Afghanistan. This cooperation was in the form of supporting the fight against terrorism and military assistance to Afghanistan. Nonetheless, as the Taliban re-emerged and steadily gained power, Russia began to recalculate its mission in Afghanistan. When U.S.–Afghanistan relations soured in the wake of the 2009 presidential elections in Afghanistan, the Russia–Afghanistan relationship began to expand. After the emergence of ISKP in Afghanistan in 2015, Russia again re-examined its engagement in Afghanistan and sought to partner with the Taliban to counter the new security threat to Central Asia.

All the while, Russia's main concerns with regard to the situation in Afghanistan have been the potential spillover effect of terrorism and insecurity into Central Asia, as well as the drug trafficking and cross-border crimes related issues. Although Moscow regularly highlights these threats, it is also argued that Russia exaggerates the scale of the threat with an aim to prepare the ground to enable it to play a more assertive role in the region.

Russia can play a constructive role in Afghanistan's security by using its influence on regional countries that play a crucial role in the Afghan conflict;

42. The US Embassy in Afghanistan. The Kabul Process for Peace & Security Cooperation in Afghanistan Declaration. 01 March 2018. <https://af.usembassy.gov/kabul-process-peace-security-cooperation-afghanistan-declaration/>

43. Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process official website. <http://www.hoa.gov.af/library/declarations.html>

its relations with the Taliban; and the existing multilateral platforms including the SCO, the Kabul Process for Peace and Stability in Afghanistan; and the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process. However, it is important to note that the prospects of these possibilities are grim due to the U.S.-Russia rivalry in the region.

Policy Recommendations

- Given how the US and Russia have played key roles in shaping the nature of peace and stability in Afghanistan, especially with the latest phase of the peace related negotiations, it is essential that Washington and Moscow unite in this regard and work together in this direction to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan.
- As Russia is concerned about the stability of regional countries because of the increasing presence of the ISKP and other jihadi groups based and/or operating in Afghanistan, Russia should utilize its contacts with the Taliban and work on comprehensive strategy to prepare the Taliban for peace talks with the Afghan government.
- Russia should also develop a comprehensive plan and engage all regional countries so that all the relevant countries contribute constructively towards bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan.