



Prospects For Russia's Policy Towards Afghanistan

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Taking advantage of the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan, Russia intends to strengthen its influence in that country by increasing contacts with the Afghan government and the Taliban. The aim is to become a key mediator in the peace process, which will enable it to influence the participants, increase control over the situation in Afghanistan, and use it in relations with the countries of the region. Russia's policy may make the stabilisation of Afghanistan more difficult and undermine the effects of the efforts made by NATO countries during the stabilisation mission.

Conditions And Goals. During the NATO stabilisation mission, Russia had relatively little ability to influence the internal situation of Afghanistan. The coalition's actions against the Taliban (still considered a terrorist organisation in Russia) favoured Russia's security interests by limiting terrorist threats, as well as arms and drug trafficking in Central Asia. At the same time, [Russia has been preparing for the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan](#), building relations with the country's most important political and armed parties. One of the goals of its [contacts with the Taliban](#) was to stop the expansion of ISIS to Afghanistan and the countries of the region and limiting the activity of other local Islamic terrorist organisations with which they had cooperated. Thus, at the moment of the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO forces, a sensitive time for regional security, Russia will be trying to weaken the ability of the terrorist organisations.

Russian policy towards Afghanistan aims to influence the internal conflict in that country, limiting the activities of terrorist organisations there that pose a threat to Russia while also increasing the sale of weapons. Russia will continue to maintain contacts with the central authorities of Afghanistan, local centres of power, in particular the Taliban and the politically and militarily influential regional leaders of the Afghan Tajiks (about 27% of the population), Uzbeks (9%) and Turkmen (3%). Russia also will seek to take over the American intelligence networks among this population in the north of Afghanistan, offer it military support, intelligence and arms supplies.

Russia also will use the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO troops to increase its diplomatic involvement in international negotiations on the future of Afghanistan. Although it has been active in this field for several years, it has only recently taken significant steps in this direction, such as a meeting in the "enlarged three format" (Russia, the U.S., China, Pakistan) in Moscow on 18 March.

Afghanistan's Stability and Russia's Security. The predicted attempt by the Taliban to seize power in Afghanistan after the U.S. and NATO forces withdraw, which is favoured by [the agreement concluded between them and the U.S.](#) in 2020, poses a threat to Russia and the countries of the region. While the Taliban have committed that Afghan territory will not be used by terrorist organisations, they will not be able to deliver on these promises. The Taliban maintain tactical cooperation with Al Qaeda, lack sufficient military instruments to control these groups, and are unable to effectively combat ISIS cells. Moreover, Russia and the countries of Central Asia consider as particularly dangerous that the Taliban shelter regional terrorist groups, such as the Islamic East Turkestan Movement, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the Islamic Jihad Union. The activity of these organisations is conducive to the flow of foreign fighters in the region, building recruitment channels, and the formation of secret cells in the vicinity of Afghanistan.

The Taliban's attempt to seize power will destabilise the situation in Afghanistan again and will favour terrorist organisations. This will threaten the [security of Central](#)

[Asian states](#), as these are the groups' main recruiting base, and indirectly Russia itself, [as recruitment is also carried out among Central Asian migrants working in the country](#). All this may increase the terrorist threat, especially in the case of the weakest countries in the region, mainly Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which already have difficulties protecting their own territory against hostile groups.

The International Dimension. To guarantee itself permanent instruments of influence on the situation in Afghanistan, Russia has taken advantage of the [difficult negotiations in Qatar on the future of Afghanistan](#). The Russian authorities are striving to be a key mediator, portraying Russia as more effective than the U.S. and maintaining working contacts with both the Afghan government and the Taliban.

To strengthen its influence in Afghanistan and develop cooperation with the countries involved in the Afghan peace process, Russia also will use the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in which Afghanistan is an observer state. By increasing the involvement of SCO countries in Afghanistan, Russia will seek to limit the influence of actors from outside the region, especially the U.S. or the EU. Russia also will use SCO instruments to develop transactional cooperation on Afghanistan with other countries of the region, and above all with China. The main mechanism of the SCO for cooperation in combating terrorism is the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. It can be used against Uyghur fighters in Afghan territory, which will limit the scale of these terrorist groups' activities in Afghanistan. Cooperation within the SCO also will allow Russia to limit [China's involvement in regional security](#).

In turn, Russia will make the most of the highly probable destabilisation in Afghanistan to strengthen its control over Central Asian states by increasing the number of military drills carried out under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) on the pretext of the need to improve regional security. In Tajikistan, Afghanistan's least stable neighbour, the largest CSTO exercises this year and more military activities than in previous years have already been planned. Russia also is considering strengthening its [201st military base there](#). Moreover, Russia will try to use its position as regional security guarantor and will strengthen political pressure on other Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan that are not part of the CSTO (Uzbekistan,

Turkmenistan) to [expand military and bilateral cooperation](#) on control of their borders, explaining this by the need to fight threats from Afghanistan.

In turn, in relations with India and Pakistan, Russia's strengthening influence in Afghanistan will serve it when countering regional energy and transport projects that threaten Russian interests, such as the TAPI gas pipeline (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India), and to influence migration pressure from Afghanistan to Iran.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Russia will use the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan to increase its influence there. For this purpose, it will maintain its strategy of developing cooperation with both the Afghan government and the Taliban. The continuation of a low-intensity conflict in Afghanistan is perceived by Russia as a factor strengthening its policy instruments towards Central Asia. This will allow it to increase its military presence, and thus political influence, in the countries of the region, which likely will indirectly limit China's growing military involvement.

In view of the limited opportunities to compete with American and European financial support and development aid, or Chinese economic instruments, Russia's main tool to achieve its goals in Afghanistan will be military cooperation and intelligence activities.

As part of the OSCE presidency in 2022, Poland may initiate joint actions of the members to stabilise border between Central Asia states and Afghanistan. All countries in the region perceive the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO troops as a threat to their security, mainly in border regions. The OSCE, experienced in conducting reconciliation activities and monitoring the situation at the borders in Eastern Europe or in the Balkans, could develop additional forms of support for the border areas of Afghanistan. This would limit the scale of the transnational threats originating in this country and make it difficult for Russia to use them in its regional policy.

Poland may also propose to NATO countries to establish a coalition to support reforms in Afghanistan (aid funds, scholarships, counselling, and training), the main task of which would be to maintain the achievements of the NATO members' missions to stabilise and democratise the country.