

Russia's Policy Overtures in Afghanistan

Claudia Chia and Zheng Haiqi

Summary

On 20 October 2021, the Russia-led 'Moscow Format Consultations' convened in its capital city. This is the largest and most high-profile international meeting on Afghanistan since the Taliban took over in August 2021. The joint statement stressed the need for "practical engagement" to acclimate to "the new reality [of] the Taliban coming to power in the country, irrespective of the official recognition of the new Afghan government by the international community." This paper discusses the recent meeting, Russia's policy towards Afghanistan and its views of the Taliban.

Introduction

On 20 October 2021, the 'Moscow Format Consultations' convened for the third time. Russia launched this format in 2017 as a six-country consultation mechanism of special representatives (China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, India and Afghanistan), which later expanded to include Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) and Taliban representatives in 2018. Despite Moscow's invitation, Washington did not attend, citing "technical reasons". Tajikistan was conspicuously absent, owing to recent tensions between Dushanbe and the Taliban.

During the meeting, the 10 regional countries demanded the Taliban meet the "fundamental prerequisite" of human rights standards and inclusivity to secure Afghanistan's national reconciliation.¹ The countries are still waiting to see the performance of the interim Taliban administration and the reaction of the international community before deciding on diplomatic recognition. Their current focus is to ensure that relations and cooperation with the Taliban can develop rather than cause a rupture of ties, which would be the worst-case scenario for regional stability.

Afghanistan shares borders with six countries – Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Iran and China – none of which presently has cordial relations with Washington or hosts American bases. These regional stakeholders share the common interest in safeguarding their borders in fear of attacks from the Taliban and other militants in Kabul. According to Zamir Kabulov, Russian President Vladimir Putin's Special Envoy to Afghanistan, "a big political bargaining is going on" between the countries and the Taliban to secure

¹ Joint Statement of the Participants in the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 20 October 2021, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4913908.

security guarantees.² The Taliban later pledged to work with Russia, China and Iran to combat the Islamic State (IS) and drug trafficking.

The joint statement calls for “a collective initiative” to pressure the United Nations (UN) to organise a donor conference to channel aid into Afghanistan. Subtle shades were thrown at the West that “the core burden” to rebuild Afghanistan “must be shouldered by troop-based actors who were in the country for the past 20 years.” As Kabul changes from an international to a regional issue with United States’ (US) exit, the regional actors are reluctant with some lacking the ability to handle the vacuum left. Obtaining international aid for Afghanistan is thus crucial to ensuring that the challenges of refugees and instability will not burden the regional states.

The meeting exemplifies Russia’s continued efforts to engage the Taliban and regional actors. Since the Taliban took control in August 2021, Moscow has had several conversations with regional leaders and has been assisting the Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan to strengthen their border security. However, questions persist over Russia’s commitment to contribute to Afghanistan’s reconstruction as Moscow has yet to deliver on its promise of humanitarian aid.

This paper opines that Moscow continues to view Kabul through the regional lens of maintaining its security domination in the post-Soviet space and deter American engagement in its backyard.

Russia’s Policy since 1991

Following the end of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991) and the collapse of Russian-backed Najibullah’s administration in Afghanistan (1992), Russia was apprehensive about having any direct involvement in Afghanistan. However, the Tajikistan Civil War (1992-1996) entangled Russia into fighting the Afghan *mujahideen* along the Tajik-Afghan border, and the rise of the Taliban (1994-1995) exacerbated security in Russia’s southern periphery. Moscow grew suspicious of the Taliban’s ties with international Islamist groups and Chechen rebel forces, leading the Kremlin to support the Northern Alliance in its resistance against the Taliban. Due to its tenuous experience in fighting Islamist fighters in Central Asia and Afghanistan and separatist forces in Chechnya, Russia recognised the “power of militant Islam” and designated terrorism as one of its primary external threats since the 1990s.³

Putin was among the first to offer condolences and assistance to US President George W Bush in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks. It was Putin’s first term, and he was interested in developing ties with the West to improve Russia’s global stature. In fact, Washington and Moscow formed a joint working group on Afghanistan earlier in 2000. The shared goal of

² Maria Tsvetkova, “Russia presses Taliban to open up government, calls for Afghan aid,” *Reuters*, 20 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/russia-urges-international-aid-afghanistan-talks-with-taliban-2021-10-20/>.

³ Dmitri Trenin and Alexei Malashenko, “Afghanistan: A View from Moscow,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2010.

fighting terrorism and a common antagonist in Islamic fundamentalism provided an opportunity for the two countries to cooperate.⁴

Despite reservations from Russian officials, Putin agreed to the establishment of US bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and shared valuable information with Washington. After the fall of the Taliban in December 2001, Moscow opened a diplomatic mission in Kabul and established relations with the interim Afghan government under Hamid Karzai. Between 2002 and 2009, Moscow provided a total of US\$40 million (S\$54 million) in humanitarian aid to Kabul and US\$109 million (S\$147 million) of funds to Afghan security sectors. The Russian Supreme Court outlawed the Taliban as a terrorist organisation in 2003, even though the group has never launched assaults on Russian soil.

The US-led operation in Afghanistan provided a security cushion for neighbouring countries by containing fighting within Afghan borders. Washington addressed Moscow's needs by fending off potential Islamist threats without needing Moscow to be directly involved. However, the US-Russia cooperation slowly eroded with the expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to the Baltic states, the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, disagreements over US-led invasion of Iraq and suspected Washington's compliance in "colour revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine.⁵

Russia was becoming concerned that a prolonged Western presence in the region would erode its influence. From 2009 on, the Kremlin was critical of the new American policy to start negotiations with the Taliban; it decided to recalibrate its Afghan policy and devote more attention to engage Kabul on its own terms.

Despite its assistance to Washington and NATO, Russia did not receive the respect it had hoped for as a player of equal standing. Disappointed by the lack of equitable cooperation and recognition, Moscow's actions in Kabul became increasingly inconsistent. On the one hand, it provided information and practical assistance to the US-led coalition, such as logistical support for the Northern Distribution Network's delivery of supplies into Afghanistan; on the other, it worked to curb US influence in the region, such as pressuring Kyrgyzstan to terminate American lease on Manas base.⁶

The start of the withdrawal of US-led forces from Afghanistan in 2014 raised Kabul's importance in Moscow's strategic calculus, as the security vacuum would undermine regional security. Moreover, US-Russia ties nosedived in the same year due to Russia's annexation of Crimea. Moscow was expelled from the G8 and faced increasing isolation from the West. Subsequently, Russian intervention in Syria with an airstrike campaign in 2015 was a game-changer that defeated IS forces. The military interventions in Crimea and Syria successfully posed a challenge to US-dominated world order while also demonstrating

⁴ Angela Stent, "The impact of September 11 on US-Russian relations," The Brookings Institution, 8 September 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/08/the-impact-of-september-11-on-us-russian-relations/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Renanah Miles, "Russia: Friend or Foe on Afghanistan," in Gale A Mattox and Stephen M Grenier (eds), *Coalition Challenges in Afghanistan* (Stanford University Press: 2015), 273-275.

Russian military capabilities. Moscow thus gained the confidence to reassert itself as a geopolitical power capable of challenging the West.

Motivated by its confidence and concerns over IS expansion, Russia abandoned its position of not engaging the Taliban and initiated direct communication. In December 2015, two months after Russia intervened in Syria, Kabulov stated, “the Taliban interest objectively coincides with ours” in fighting IS, and that Russia and the Taliban had “channels for exchanging information.”⁷ Washington decried the growing Russia-Taliban connections, alleging that Moscow was backing the Taliban.⁸

Mediation Efforts

Besides, Russian officials realised that the Taliban could not be defeated by military means alone, and Moscow could not be left out from the diplomatic upsurge of interest on Afghanistan. The US’ impending withdrawal spurred many countries like China, the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates to engage the Taliban. To maintain its monopoly on security in Eurasia, the Kremlin must insert into Afghan matters.

On 1 December 2016, Russia identified Afghanistan as one of its regional foreign policy priorities in its Foreign Policy Concept.⁹ On 26 December 2016, Moscow convened its first mediation initiative on Afghanistan – a trilateral consultation with China and Pakistan. This meeting served as a precursor to the Moscow Format of regional consultations and highlighted Russia’s emphasis on reaching a political settlement premised on regionalism. Moscow also joined other regional initiatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)-Afghanistan Contact Group.

Additionally, Russia pursued an ‘Inter-Afghan Dialogue’, with the inaugural dialogue taking place in Moscow in February 2019. It was attended by Afghan ex-government figures, ex-Northern Alliance leaders, Taliban and Afghan diaspora. No government officials from regional states, Russia and Afghanistan were present. The Kremlin denied formal involvement, although the Russian foreign ministry did lend some support. The next two rounds of dialogue occurred in May and September 2019 with official acknowledgment.

Moscow welcomed the US-Taliban peace deal brokered in February 2020 and proactively participated in the ‘Trioka-plus’ framework featuring Beijing, Washington and Islamabad. Since August 2021, Moscow has met regional and international actors like China, Pakistan, Central Asia and the G7 on bilateral and multilateral platforms (SCO, UN, C5+1) to discuss Afghanistan. The latest Consultation demonstrates that the Kremlin remains firm in its stance that regionalism is the best formula to address Afghan issues.

⁷ Andrew Roth, “Russia is sharing information with the Taliban to fight the Islamic State,” *The Washington Post*, 23 December 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/12/23/russia-is-sharing-information-with-the-taliban-to-fight-the-islamic-state/>.

⁸ Vinay Kaura, “Russia’s Afghan Policy: Determinants and Outcomes,” *Strategic Analysis* (2021): 7-8.

⁹ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 1 December 2016, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6B6Z29/content/id/2542248.

The Taliban: A Lesser Evil

The Kremlin's true sentiments toward the Taliban are hard to ascertain but Moscow's official tone has softened in recent years. In July 2021, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov painted the Taliban as "sane people", "rational" and a "powerful force".¹⁰

The Taliban's repeated statements that its struggle is restricted to Afghanistan and its claims of opposing IS contributed to Moscow's assessment of Taliban as a lesser evil and smaller threat than IS. Russia is deeply concerned by the spread of radicalism and transnational extremist movements, particularly the emergence of Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), an IS branch comprising fighters formerly affiliated with the Taliban and al-Qaeda that began operations in Afghanistan in 2015. An IS stronghold in Kabul would pose threat to the North Caucasus where Russia and IS have clashed. Radicalism in the restive Ferghana Valley between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan continues to jeopardise security.

Furthermore, since 2014, the number of Eurasian-origin foreign terrorist fighters joining militant groups in Syria and Iraq has increased, raising concerns that they might return to launch attacks.¹¹ Putin has also recently warned of militants camouflaging as refugees to cross from Kabul into neighbouring states.

Even as it accepts the "new reality" of the Taliban being in power, Russia remains cautious of the security risks and holds doubts about the Taliban's pledge to fight terrorism. According to Alexander Shein, Russia's Ambassador to Israel, the Russian law denotes organisations as terrorists when they "intentionally conduct acts of terror in Russian territory, or against Russian interests abroad – installations, embassies, offices, or citizens."¹² If we put his definition into a working theory, Moscow's continued ban on the Taliban underscores that it still views the group as an external threat. Indeed, the Collective Security Treaty Organization was running military drills near the Tajik-Afghan border (18 -23 October 2021) at the same time as the Moscow Format Consultations. Having knowledge of the Taliban gaining ground in Kabul in early August 2021, Russia undertook several military drills with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China in anticipation of violence.

Notably, the threat of attacks by the Taliban is smaller than the potential of the Taliban triumph fuelling spread of Islamist radicalism and motivating a resurgence of militant and rebel activities across the region. Even though Russia no longer shares any geographical contiguity with Afghanistan since 1991, Moscow is still fearful of "militant Islam" as it "does not have sufficient confidence in the solidity of the Central Asia regimes or in its own capacity to insulate the region from [such influence]."¹³

¹⁰ "Russia Calls Taliban 'Rational,' Blames Afghan Gov't for Blocking Talks," *The Moscow Times*, 23 July 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/07/23/russia-calls-taliban-rational-blames-afghan-govt-for-blocking-talks-a74599>.

¹¹ Ekaterina Stepanova, "Foreign Terrorist Fighters from Russia in and after Syria and Iraq: (Trans) National Trends and Threats," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021): 6.

¹² "Russian Ambassador to Israel: We Do Not Consider Hamas and Hizbullah to Be Terrorists at All," The Middle East Media Research Institute, 9 June 2017, <https://www.memri.org/tv/russian-ambassador-israel-hamas-hizbullah-not-terrorists>.

¹³ See note 3.

Conclusion

Moscow has little choice but to provide security for Central Asia as it makes it clear that American presence in the region is no longer welcome.¹⁴ Because of its past experiences, the Kremlin is leery of direct involvement in Afghanistan and will most likely intervene directly only under the auspices of the UN or as the last resort. Its primary role will be limited to assisting regional countries to bolster border security to avert refugee crisis and fighting.

Despite its proclaimed interests in regional economic integration, Moscow has few economic incentives to offer Kabul as Russia has largely acquiesced the regional economic leadership to China. Russia's humanitarian assistance to Kabul is projected to be less than Beijing's aid valued at US\$31 million (S\$41.78 million).

Another thorny issue is the illicit narcotics emanating from Afghanistan which has afflicted regional countries. Afghanistan is the world's largest opium producer and its drugs travel across porous Central Asia to Europe and Russia. Given the Taliban's reliance on drug revenue for its operations, it is unclear how the group would respond to external pressures to curb trafficking.

It is in Moscow's best interests if the Taliban concedes to pressures and forms an inclusive government. However, it would be unrealistic to expect that the Taliban could fight the other militants. The 8 October 2021 attack on a Shia mosque in northern Afghanistan by the ISKP demonstrated that there are other militant rivalries at work with ulterior objectives that will continue to undermine peace. In addition to engaging with the Taliban, regional parties should consider what more they might do to combat terrorism in the region.

.....

Ms Claudia Chia is a Research Analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be contacted at claudiachia@nus.edu.sg. Mr Zheng Haiqi is a PhD candidate in the School of International Studies, Renmin University of China, and a Visiting Scholar at ISAS. He can be contacted at zheng.haiqi@nus.edu.sg. The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

¹⁴ Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia against US troops in Central Asia near Afghanistan," *The Associated Press*, 13 July 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/b1cc3ba07b4ebcdaa44a7af69ea3f90c>.