

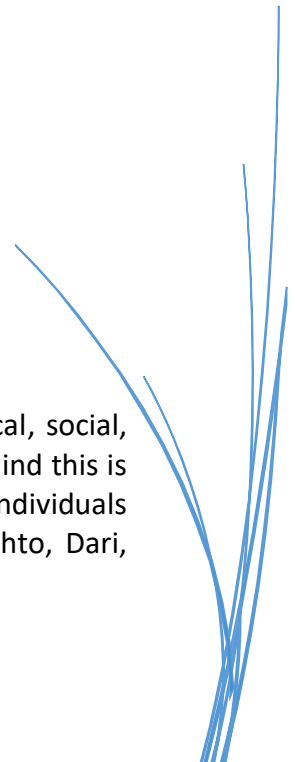
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RUSSIA AND THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE: POLICY CHANGES AND DUAL OBJECTIVES



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



RUSSIA AND THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE: POLICY CHANGES AND DUAL OBJECTIVES

Introduction

Although Russia and Afghanistan are not considered neighboring countries based on geographical proximity, any situation in either country has significant implications for the other due to regional connectivity. A stable Afghanistan not only ensures benefits for the nation itself but also for its neighboring countries, including Russia. Given these considerations, Afghanistan holds a special place in Russia's foreign policy. Nevertheless, the frequent political changes over the years in Afghanistan have resulted in a lack of consistent policy towards the country.

Before the events of September 11, 2001, Russia not only lacked diplomatic relations with the ruling Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan but also actively hindered the emirate's development. Following the United States' military intervention in Afghanistan, Russia supported the international coalition formed against the Islamic Emirate. However, as the US-led coalition faced challenges and did not achieve success in Afghanistan, Russia diverged from the international coalition's stance and initiated relations with the Islamic Emirate.

This study aims to elucidate why Russia chose to establish relations with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, especially considering that, during the initial period of the Islamic Emirate's rule, Russia not only lacked diplomatic ties but also imposed obstacles against the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan.

RUSSIA'S POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON AFGHANISTAN

As there are different political viewpoints within a country, they play a decisive role in gaining power, establishing relations with other countries, and shaping foreign policy. When a political faction is in power, it is inevitable that it will incorporate the perspectives of its supporters into the foreign policy of the country. When not in power, there is a tendency to pay attention to the political views of other groups and parties, leveraging them while keeping a focus on the national interests of the country.

Russia's foreign policy apparatus has also drawn upon the various perspectives on Afghanistan within the country in shaping its foreign policy towards Afghanistan. In general, there are three predominant political perspectives on Afghanistan within Russia.

First: The political viewpoint of this group is that a unified Afghanistan is unsustainable due to numerous ethnic differences in the country. These differences have historically hindered the success of a single government in Afghanistan. Russia is deemed incapable of resolving these internal divisions. Therefore, it is suggested that Russia should focus more on the northern provinces of Afghanistan. Having a divided Afghanistan into northern and southern parts will help in preventing any impacts of Afghanistan's insecurity in Russia through Russia Central Asia. The suggestion is for Russia to provide support to the political figures in Afghanistan's Northern provinces. This assistance is envisioned to create a buffer ensuring Russia's security. In evaluating the aforementioned perspective, it was noted that Russian foreign policy was influenced by this political standpoint during the civil wars in Afghanistan and subsequently, during the initial rule of the Islamic Emirate. During the initial civil wars in Afghanistan, the Islamic Emirate came to power for the first time. During this period, the Russians provided



substantial assistance to the Northern Alliance against the Islamic Emirate. This support aimed to strengthen Russian influence in these provinces and install leaders who would collaborate with Russia in safeguarding security and common interests. The objective was to use these provinces as a buffer against potential threats to the security and mutual interests of both Russia and the provinces.

Second: Another political perspective on Afghanistan in Russia suggests that Afghanistan's issues should be treated as foreign matters. According to this viewpoint, Russia should solely provide humanitarian aid to the country to enhance international trust in Russia. Symbolic investments in the economic projects of Afghanistan are also recommended. Advocates of this opinion argue that the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan is crucial for safeguarding Russia's interests. They emphasize that Russia should not act unilaterally against terrorism in Afghanistan but should collaborate with the international coalition.

Examining this perspective makes it clear that Russia's foreign policy was influenced by the invasion of Afghanistan led by the United States of America. This is evident in Russia's support for the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the various opportunities provided. Russian President Vladimir Putin was among the first world leaders to pledge support for the U.S. invasion. The country committed to sharing intelligence information with the U.S.-led international coalition, utilizing space, and allowing the construction of U.S. military bases in Central Asia.¹

Third: Russia's third political perspective on Afghanistan suggests that the establishment of a strong, centralized, and unified government in Afghanistan would significantly contribute to combating drug trafficking and terrorism in the region. This group contends that such a government, with complete independence, has the potential to quell internal resistance within Afghanistan and eliminate the need for the presence of foreign troops.

When examining the above political perspective, it becomes evident that it underscores several critical points. In practice, the establishment of an independent, centralized, and unified Afghanistan can have a positive impact on the security and stability, not only within Afghanistan but also in neighboring and regional countries.

Russia initially joined the international coalition to combat drug trafficking from Afghanistan and to address terrorism concerns. Over time, Russia found that these goals were not fully met, leading to increased concerns. Consequently, Russia shifted its approach, aiming to support a government in Afghanistan capable of addressing these worries effectively. This change in perspective led to the restoration of relations with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Russia has recognized the wide influence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and acknowledges that no government can effectively govern the country without the participation of this group. With the return of the Islamic Emirate to power, Russia swiftly initiated relations with Afghanistan. Furthermore, strained relations between Russia and the West in 2014, particularly over the issue of Ukraine, influenced Moscow's decision. The emergence of the Khorasan branch of the Islamic State in Afghanistan prompted Russia to strengthen its ties with the Taliban to address security and geopolitical concerns.

Moscow believes that the Taliban, being focused on Afghanistan, pose a lesser threat compared to the Islamic State group, which is seen as a regional and global security concern. Russia considers supporting the Islamic Emirate a logical strategy, with the conviction that the Taliban



can more effectively combat the Islamic State or ISIS than other groups. Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special representative for Afghanistan, emphasized the alignment of interests, stating, "Taliban is fighting in Afghanistan against the people we fought in Syria; therefore, our interests are the same."²

RUSSIAN OBJECTIVE

The geopolitical significance of Afghanistan has made it a focal point for Russia, given its connection to Afghanistan through Central Asia, like the rest of the world. Afghanistan holds the potential to serve as a geopolitical link connecting Russia with South Asia through Central Asia. Consequently, any developments in Afghanistan have a direct impact on Russia's interests. Positive conditions in Afghanistan could not only ensure Russia's security but also offer economic benefits by leveraging Afghanistan's crucial role in connecting South Asia and Central Asia. Additionally, addressing the issue of drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Russia becomes possible in favorable circumstances.

Conversely, if conditions take a negative turn, as previously mentioned, all of Russia's interests are at risk. Russia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) with several Central Asian countries, aiming for mutual cooperation, including military aid. As per the organization's constitution, member countries are obligated to collaborate with each other. In this context, Russia's goal is to seek assurance from Afghanistan, positively influencing the security of the member countries of this organization situated in proximity to Afghanistan.

Russia is pursuing its objectives through regional organizations in Afghanistan, where it holds significant influence. These organizations include the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Moscow format. The Moscow format involves meetings of foreign ministers from Russia, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, as well as National Security Advisor meetings. Notably, Russia, along with the member countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, conducted military exercises in Tajikistan on October 18, 2021.³ These exercises, held in a country bordering the organization's interests with Afghanistan, are believed to be aimed at mitigating and neutralizing security threats originating from Afghanistan.

Moreover, discussions on security and stability in Afghanistan were conducted in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which Russia is a member. In the latest meeting of the Moscow format, which included Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi represented the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. All participants, including Russia, urged the Taliban to form a coalition government and uphold human rights. Representatives from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey were also invited to participate in this meeting.⁴

On the other hand, Russia is actively collaborating with several countries to mitigate threats emanating from Afghanistan. Recently, Russia has intensified security cooperation with India to jointly address the challenges faced by both nations from Afghanistan. Regarding this collaboration, the Russian ambassador in New Delhi, Nikolai Kodashov, stated in September 2021: "Both Moscow and New Delhi are concerned about the spread of terrorism from



Afghanistan, as this situation is perceived as a threat to Central Asia and Kashmir." Additionally, Ajit Doval, the National Security Council advisor of India, held discussions with his Russian counterpart, Nikolai Patrushev, on enhancing bilateral cooperation in the prevention of terrorism and drug trafficking.⁵ This collaborative effort concerning Afghanistan is not limited to India; Russia has also conducted military exercises with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on August 5, 2021, involving more than 2,500 soldiers from these three countries.⁶

OBJECTIVES OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is concurrently pursuing political and economic objectives in establishing relations with Russia. On the political front, the Islamic Emirate aims to integrate into the international community, seeking international legitimacy. They are making efforts to persuade other countries that they can effectively prevent threats originating from Afghanistan, thereby ensuring both Afghanistan's security and global stability. This diplomatic strategy is intended to succeed in building relations with influential countries worldwide. Consequently, the Islamic Emirate is actively working to forge robust political ties with Russia. This approach aims not only to gain recognition from Russia but also to capture the attention of other nations with positive relations with Russia.

Economically, Afghanistan is considered an import-dependent nation. In the region, Russia is perceived as a country capable of playing a constructive role in meeting Afghanistan's economic needs. This recognition has become a driving force behind the Islamic Emirate's heightened interest in strengthening its relations with Russia.

EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS

In 2021, with the collapse of the former republican system in Afghanistan and the rise of the Islamic Emirate to power following the withdrawal of United States forces, Russia perceived a strategic opportunity to assert its influence in Afghanistan. Consequently, Russia initiated efforts to form a coalition government in Afghanistan, collaborating with the Islamic Emirate and certain groups and individuals under its influence. In October 2021, the Foreign Minister of Russia stated that they would not recognize the Islamic Emirate unless it committed to establishing a government based on political and ethnic partnerships. However, the Islamic Emirate maintained its position that the current government of Afghanistan is comprehensive, and that the establishment of the government is an internal matter, rejecting foreign interference. As there was no discernible change in the Islamic Emirate's stance on the international stage, Russia had to reassess its approach. In January 2022, Russia insisted on practical interaction with the Islamic Emirate. President Vladimir Putin, in a meeting with the President of Tajikistan, affirmed his country's efforts to strengthen relations with the Islamic Emirate. In April of the same year, Russia handed over the Afghan embassy in Moscow to representatives of the Taliban. It's worth noting that the Russian embassy remains active in Kabul, and Russian diplomats continue to manage its affairs.

Russia's decision to engage constructively with the Islamic Emirate may stem from the latter's efforts to ensure overall security in Afghanistan and effective governance. Enhanced security in



Afghanistan addresses the perceived threats that Russia anticipates from the region against Central Asia. Additionally, when Russia faced reactions from Western countries due to its actions in Ukraine, it sought to establish regional coordination against Western nations in political, economic, and military spheres. Therefore, Afghanistan's role in fostering harmony among regional countries played a significant role in dissuading Russia from its initial plan.

In response to the attack on Russia's embassy in Kabul by the Daesh group in September 2022, resulting in casualties, Russia's concerns about Afghanistan heightened.⁷ Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, at a meeting of the defense ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Delhi on April 28, 2023, highlighted perceived threats from Afghanistan to Central Asian countries. He urged member countries to enhance coordination and joint efforts against terrorism, expressing concerns about potential influences from international terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (Daesh), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan.⁸

The Russian Defense Minister's statements were rejected by the spokesman of the Islamic Emirate, Zabihullah Mujahid. Mujahid emphasized that Afghanistan has not posed any threats to the region or the world in the last two years. Furthermore, in February of the same year, the Foreign Minister of the Islamic Emirate rejected Russia's accusations that thousands of Daesh militants had gathered in the north of Afghanistan, posing a threat to the security of Central Asian countries.

Despite the ISIS attack on the Russian Embassy in Kabul casting a shadow on Russia's intentions, the country continued its interactions with the Islamic Emirate. In May of this year, Russia invited a delegation from the Islamic Emirate to participate in the Russian-Islamic International Economic Forum held in the Republic of Kazan. Led by Nooruddin Azizi, the head of the Ministry of Commerce, the Islamic Emirate's delegation engaged in discussions about business potential and economic opportunities in Afghanistan with members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, including Russia. The forum, held on May 18th and 19th, aimed to strengthen commercial, economic, scientific, technical, and social relations between Russia and the member countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, first established in 2009.⁹

In general, it can be observed that Russia is currently making efforts to mitigate the negative impact of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan on Afghans. The current focus is on Afghanistan's involvement in countering drug trafficking, addressing security concerns, and boosting the economic sector. Russia aims to export gas, oil, foodstuffs, medicine, and machinery to Afghanistan, while also investing in mining, road construction, energy production, dams, and railways. Simultaneously, by strengthening economic ties with Afghanistan, Russia is positioning itself to export goods to South Asia. Recognizing the mutual need, South Asian countries look to Russia in various economic sectors, and this demand can be effectively met when both sides maintain robust relations with Afghanistan, utilizing the country as a bridge.

CHALLENGES TO STRENGTHENING BILATERAL RELATIONS

While both countries have the potential for stronger bilateral relations, several challenges persist, hindering their advancement. These challenges should be addressed through serious



measures by both sides to enhance their relations and fully leverage the opportunities available. It is recommended that concerted efforts be made to overcome these challenges for the mutual benefit of both nations.

1. Russia designated the Taliban as a terrorist group in 2003, and as of now, no concrete steps have been taken to remove them from this list. If Russia genuinely aims to collaborate closely with the Islamic Emirate and address concerns related to Afghanistan, it should view the Islamic Emirate as a responsible government and take the lead in removing the Taliban's name from the list of terrorists. It's worth noting that during a meeting with the Taliban, the President of Russia pledged to delist the group.
2. While Russia has handed over the Afghan embassy in Moscow to representatives of the Islamic Emirate, official recognition of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is still pending. Non-recognition not only creates legal challenges in their relationship but also poses a significant barrier to further strengthening ties. Moreover, it hampers and delays actions by other countries in this regard.
3. The absence of a comprehensive constitution in Afghanistan poses a challenge. Despite the Islamic Emirate's assurance of preparing a constitution, they have not yet drafted one that encompasses all critical aspects of the country. This lack of a formal constitution becomes a substantial obstacle to recognition. In the absence of formal diplomatic ties between countries, optimal relations become inevitable. Addressing this gap in governance would contribute to the enhancement of diplomatic relations.
4. While the Islamic Emirate has effectively fought against ISIS, occasional attacks by this group still occur. These incidents not only raise security concerns for Russia but also contribute to concerns for other countries. These security issues have cast a shadow on the relationship between the two countries.
5. Despite the Islamic Emirate's assurances that Afghanistan's territory will not be used by any group against another country, building trust in this regard takes time. The current lack of trust poses a challenge to the relations between Russia and the Islamic Emirate.
6. Humanitarian assistance from Western countries, particularly the United States, presents another challenge to strengthening relations between Russia and the Islamic Emirate. Russia views this aid with suspicion, despite the Islamic Emirate declaring neutrality in foreign policy. Building trust and dispelling doubts is a time-consuming process, necessary for both countries to find common ground and establish a climate of trust.

RESULT

The Islamic Emirate has indeed experienced a shift in its relationship with Russia, evolving from a history of hostility to one of friendship and cooperation. Russia has recognized that the government in Afghanistan, supported by a joint coalition led by its international rival and foreign supporters, failed to adequately safeguard Russia's interests in the region. Over the years, this government was unable to effectively counter drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Russia and prevent the transfer of terrorist threats to Russia and Central Asia. The emergence of the ISIS terrorist group in Afghanistan further heightened concerns, leading Russia to reinitiate and strengthen its ties with the Islamic Emirate.



The collaborative efforts between Russia and the Islamic Emirate against shared concerns, particularly in countering drug trafficking and combating the activities of the Daesh group, have yielded positive results. International reports indicate a significant reduction of approximately 90 percent in drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Simultaneously, the Islamic Emirate's effective efforts against Daesh activities have contributed to the positive impact on the strengthening of relations between the two countries.

SUGGESTIONS

1. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is actively training special border guard forces to enhance their capabilities in preventing drug trafficking, aiming for a more effective approach in tackling this issue.
2. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has prioritized and strengthened security relations and cooperation with Russia and Central Asian countries to address their concerns about Afghanistan more reliably and effectively.
3. The Islamic Emirate is diplomatically encouraging Russia to share its expertise in agricultural modernization with Afghanistan, particularly in the agricultural sector, and seeking Russian participation in major projects such as road construction, mining, dams, and other key initiatives. The emphasis is also on poppy substitution to support Afghan farmers.
4. Given the strained relationship between the United States and the Islamic world after the recent conflict between Hamas and Israel, there is a heightened need to strengthen relations between Afghanistan and Russia, along with other Islamic countries. The Islamic Emirate is actively focusing on enhancing ties with Russia during this period.
5. The Islamic Emirate is making efforts to take practical measures and find solutions to overcome obstacles hindering the strengthening of relations between the Islamic Emirate and other countries. The goal is to pave the way for the international recognition of the government, allowing the Islamic Emirate to secure its position in the international community. **The end**

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