

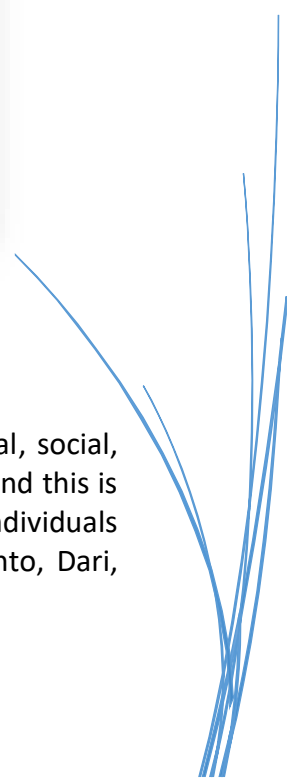
WEEKLY ANALYSIS

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EXPANDING RUSSIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN: OBJECTIVES AND CONSEQUENCES



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



EXPANDING RUSSIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN: OBJECTIVES AND CONSEQUENCES

Introduction

Although Russia, whether in the form of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, directly neighbored Afghanistan for over a century, it no longer shares a direct border with Afghanistan today. Instead, it connects to Afghanistan through Central Asia. Both Afghanistan and Russia have experienced a tumultuous history of relations and interactions. At one time, Russia was the first country to recognize Afghanistan's independence, and at another point, it invaded Afghanistan to protect its interests. During the Islamic State of Afghanistan led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, Russia initially remained neutral but later supported the Mujahideen government in its conflict with the Taliban. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Russia initially allied with the U.S., providing airspace for U.S. operations in Afghanistan, but later criticized the U.S. war in Afghanistan and opposed its presence in the country. In recent years, as the U.S. presence in Afghanistan waned, Russia established contacts with the Taliban, to the extent that it was accused by both the Afghan government and the U.S. of supporting the Taliban. When the Islamic Emirate regained power in Afghanistan in 2021, Moscow adopted a specific approach towards it. Although a few opponents of the Islamic Emirate were unofficially seen at one or two meetings in Moscow, Russia's official stance towards the Islamic Emirate has followed a clear line, which this article aims to examine.

RUSSIA'S ACTIONS REGARDING THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN

Although Russia is one of the countries that maintained its embassy in Kabul and established de facto relations with the Islamic Emirate after it regained power in Afghanistan, it appears that Russia has incrementally increased its engagement with the Islamic Emirate. In the early months of 2022, Russia took its first significant step by accepting a diplomat from the Islamic Emirate as the chargé d'affaires at the Afghan embassy in Moscow. Following this, in early 2023, Russia reopened its consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif.

Continuing this trend, in early 2024, the Russian news agency TASS reported: "The issue of removing the Taliban movement (currently banned in Russia) from the list of terrorist organizations is under consideration. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the revocation of the Taliban's status as a terrorist organization is being reviewed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, and other specialized bodies. The final decision will be made by the country's top political leadership." In support and defense of this action, Russia's Foreign Minister recently stated: "The Taliban are the ones who hold real power in Afghanistan. Like the People's Republic of China, we never closed our embassy there. Kazakhstan has recently decided to remove them from the list of terrorist groups, and we plan to do the same. We, like our allies in Central Asia, value Afghanistan."

Additionally, Russia invited representatives from the Islamic Emirate to two significant events: the "World Muslim Congress" held in May 2024 and the "Annual St. Petersburg Economic Forum" held from June 5 to 8, 2024.



Most notably, Russian President Vladimir Putin, during his recent visit to Uzbekistan, stated at a press conference in Tashkent: "I am not commenting on this issue at the moment because relations with the Taliban and Afghanistan are constantly under review. There are undeniable problems in Afghanistan, which are evident to everyone. The question is how to establish relations with the current rulers. This is a different matter, but it is necessary to build them in some manner. These are the ones who control the country and the territory. They are the current rulers of Afghanistan. Reality must be taken into account, and relations must be shaped accordingly. We are in contact with many of our partners. We consider the opinions of each of our partners and friends in the Central Asian region, and we make our decisions in coordination with them."

From all the above, it can be concluded that Russia has gradually and progressively formalized its engagement and relations with the Islamic Emirate. However, will this rapprochement lead to Russia officially recognizing the Islamic Emirate? The answer is that Russia will likely recognize the Islamic Emirate in the future. However, beyond media topics such as forming an inclusive government or respecting human rights, including the right to work and education for women, the essential issue is that Russia will not act alone in recognizing the Islamic Emirate. As consistently stated by high-ranking Russian officials, the country will not make this decision unilaterally but will act in coordination with its like-minded allies. Therefore, what objectives does Russia pursue by getting closer to the Islamic Emirate? What are the implications for the Islamic Emirate? And what regional and global consequences might arise? These are questions that need to be answered.

RUSSIA'S OBJECTIVES IN APPROACHING THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan and Russia are two countries that significantly influence each other, with Russia being more directly affected by developments in Afghanistan. Russia is influenced by Afghanistan both directly and indirectly. Directly, the security and political developments in Afghanistan, such as its alliances with Western powers like the 20-year republic aligned with the U.S., impact Russia. Indirectly, Afghanistan's relations and interactions with Central Asian countries or its security impacts on these countries can affect Russia. Historically, Russia's goals in Afghanistan have shifted based on the situation, but with the Islamic Emirate back in power, Russia has adopted a positive engagement strategy, pursuing specific objectives across three main areas: security, political, and economic.

1. Security Objectives

Russia's security objectives in Afghanistan focus on three major issues: terrorism, U.S. presence, and the performance of the Islamic Emirate.

Terrorism: The primary and most dangerous group that Russia fears is ISIS. The hostility between Russia and ISIS dates back to Russia's operations against ISIS in Syria, where Russia dealt significant blows to the group, making it one of ISIS's top enemies. Afghanistan is potentially the only place where ISIS might retaliate against Russia. Previously, with the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, Russia couldn't take effective measures against ISIS there. However, with the Islamic Emirate now in control, Russia has found an opportunity to monitor and curb ISIS activities closely, aided by the Islamic Emirate's own efforts against ISIS. The successful suppression of ISIS by the Islamic Emirate has encouraged Russia to strengthen its relations with Afghanistan.



U.S. Presence: Another significant concern for Russia is the potential re-establishment of U.S. presence in Afghanistan. One strong hypothesis is that the U.S. aimed to use its presence in Afghanistan to penetrate Central Asia, regarded as Russia's "backyard." Believing that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan served ulterior motives against Russian interests in Central Asia, Russia started to establish ties with the Islamic Emirate, knowing that it was the only force that wouldn't tolerate the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Following the Islamic Emirate's success in expelling the U.S., Russia expanded its relations with Afghanistan, viewing the Islamic Emirate as a guarantor against the return of U.S. forces.

Unified Governance: Russia assesses that the Islamic Emirate is the only force capable of exercising centralized and unified control over Afghanistan, preventing the rise of terrorist and destructive groups. This capacity has been repeatedly acknowledged by Russian officials, including the Foreign Minister and President Putin. Consequently, Russia has been solidifying its relations with the Islamic Emirate to ensure stability and security in the region.

2. Political Objectives

Russia's political objectives in approaching the Islamic Emirate can be divided into unilateral and multilateral axes.

Unilateral: Following the U.S. withdrawal, Russia saw an opportunity to increase its political presence in Afghanistan by establishing relations with the Islamic Emirate, which was not feasible during the U.S.-backed government era.

Multilateral: Russia aims to create a regional coalition to align the Islamic Emirate within the Eastern bloc. Statements from Russian officials, including Lavrov and Putin, highlight the goal of coordinating with regional partners regarding Afghanistan. Before and after the U.S. withdrawal, Afghanistan's international alignment shifted from the Western to an ambiguous stance. Russia is now striving to fill this vacuum, ensuring Afghanistan doesn't drift back into Western influence, by encouraging Central Asian countries and allies like China and Iran to form a regional coalition.

3. Economic Objectives

Russia's economic interests in Afghanistan have gained prominence with the U.S. exit, offering opportunities for increased economic presence.

Infrastructure Projects: Russia can participate in the reconstruction of infrastructure projects previously established by the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Mining Investments: Russia can invest in Afghanistan's mining sector, tapping into its vast mineral resources.

Trade Opportunities: With the Afghan market opening up to Russian goods, Russia can enhance its export and import activities with Afghanistan, fostering greater economic interdependence.



By aligning its security, political, and economic strategies, Russia seeks to ensure stability in Afghanistan, protect its interests in Central Asia, and foster a collaborative regional environment that mitigates Western influence.

THE IMPACTS OF RUSSIA'S ACTIONS ON THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE

Russia's engagement with Afghanistan, as a significant global power, holds substantial importance. The impact of Russia on Afghanistan can be evaluated from three perspectives: domestic, regional, and global.

1. Domestic Impact

Domestic Stability and Legitimacy: Russia's support can significantly enhance the Islamic Emirate's legitimacy within Afghanistan. As a major power, Russia's positive stance can solidify the Emirate's standing as a legitimate government. By withholding support from the Emirate's opposition, Russia aids in strengthening its foundation, promoting greater stability in Afghanistan. This political endorsement facilitates the development of economic relations between the two nations, allowing Afghanistan to benefit from Russian resources and diversify its import markets.

Economic Growth: Enhanced political relations with Russia open avenues for economic growth in Afghanistan. The country, reliant on primary resources and energy imports, can leverage Russia's abundant production capacities in these areas. This diversification of import sources can contribute to the overall economic stability and development of Afghanistan.

2. Regional Impact

Influence on Central Asian Neighbors: Russia's positive outlook towards the Islamic Emirate significantly influences its allies, particularly in Central Asia. Central Asian countries are aligning their policies with Russia's stance, enhancing their relations with the Islamic Emirate. Russian support at international and regional forums profoundly impacts other nations' perceptions of the Emirate.

Tajikistan and India: Tajikistan, despite its initial opposition to the Islamic Emirate, has softened its stance, likely influenced by Russia's positive view. Similarly, India, which previously had close ties with the former Afghan government and was considered a regional ally, might be swayed by Russia's positive relations. Given the strong ties between Russia and India, Russia's influence could prompt India to adopt a more cautious and potentially cooperative approach towards the Islamic Emirate.

3. Global Impact

Positive Global Influence: Globally, Russia's positive stance has a dual impact. On one hand, Russia has numerous global allies whose views could align with Russia's positive stance towards the Islamic Emirate, thereby enhancing the Emirate's global standing. Key global players, such as China, often coordinate with Russia on international issues. Both being permanent members of the UN Security Council, Russia and China have consistently opposed anti-Islamic Emirate resolutions. This alignment



influences many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, encouraging them to recognize and engage positively with the Islamic Emirate.

Negative Global Influence: On the other hand, Russia's close relationship with the Islamic Emirate might provoke adverse reactions from the West. Russia, currently at odds with Western powers, particularly the United States, due to conflicts like the one in Ukraine, could cause the West to adopt punitive measures against the Islamic Emirate. Historically, Afghanistan has suffered from aligning too closely with one major power while distancing itself from another. As the Islamic Emirate strengthens its ties with Russia, the U.S. and its allies may likely intensify their pressure and punitive actions against the Islamic Emirate.

In summary, while Russia's engagement can bolster the Islamic Emirate's domestic and regional legitimacy and economic stability, it also risks inviting increased Western opposition and potential punitive measures, reflecting the complex dynamics of international relations.

CONCLUSION

The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan and the return of the Islamic Emirate have provided Russia with a significant opportunity to strengthen its ties with Afghanistan. This development can be seen as a golden opportunity for Russia to pursue its security, political, and economic objectives more effectively in Afghanistan.

Security Objectives: With the rise of the Islamic Emirate, Russia's concerns regarding terrorist groups and the presence of the U.S. in Afghanistan have been alleviated to some extent. The new regime's efforts to combat groups like ISIS contribute positively to Russia's security landscape. By fostering relations with the Islamic Emirate, Russia can better monitor and counteract the activities of such groups, ensuring a more stable regional security environment.

Political Objectives: Politically, Russia aims to fill the vacuum left by the U.S. in the region. The absence of American influence allows Russia to establish a stronger political presence in Afghanistan. By aligning itself with the Islamic Emirate, Russia can enhance its influence over Afghanistan's internal and external affairs, positioning itself as a key player in the region.

Economic Objectives: Economically, Afghanistan presents various opportunities for Russia. The withdrawal of U.S. forces and the subsequent rise of the Islamic Emirate open up avenues for Russia to invest in Afghanistan's infrastructure, mining, and other sectors. Strengthening economic ties can lead to mutually beneficial trade relations, contributing to Afghanistan's development and diversifying Russia's economic partnerships.

In pursuit of these objectives, Russia has incrementally increased its engagement with the Islamic Emirate since its return to power. By taking a step-by-step approach, Russia aims to solidify its relationship with the new regime. However, whether Russia's recent actions will lead to the official recognition of the Islamic Emirate remains uncertain. The decision will likely be made in coordination with Russia's regional and global partners rather than unilaterally.



In summary, Russia's strategic engagement with the Islamic Emirate is driven by a combination of security, political, and economic interests. While Russia is making significant strides in strengthening these ties, the official recognition of the Islamic Emirate will depend on a broader consensus among Russia's allies and international partners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above discussion, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Utilize Russia's Political and Economic Capacities:** The Islamic Emirate should leverage Russia's political and economic strengths to enhance its political standing and drive economic growth in the country. Establishing robust ties with Russia can help in infrastructure development, resource extraction, and increasing trade.
2. **Address Security and Political Concerns of Other Countries:** The Islamic Emirate should evaluate the security and political concerns of other nations and respond positively to their legitimate concerns. This approach will help build a stable and cooperative international environment, reducing the risk of conflicts and fostering goodwill.
3. **Maintain Balance in Foreign Policy:** The Islamic Emirate should exercise caution in its foreign policy by maintaining a balance in its relations with major powers. It is crucial to avoid aligning too closely with any single power to prevent the country from being drawn into new crises. A balanced approach will ensure that Afghanistan maintains its sovereignty and navigates international relations effectively.

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