

# SECURITY INSIGHTS



## *Return to Kabul? Russian Policy in Afghanistan*

By David G. Lewis

### *Executive Summary*

- Afghanistan looms large in Russia's strategic culture. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russia has viewed Afghanistan as its southernmost strategic flank and as an arena for competition with the West. After a long hiatus, Russia has resumed this historical position, re-emerging as a significant player in the complex geopolitics of Afghanistan.
- Russia has reportedly developed ties with a wide range of political parties and armed groups inside Afghanistan, including the Taliban. Russia convened its own intra-Afghan talks in Moscow in 2019, before the United States and the Taliban resumed their own peace talks. Although Moscow publicly supports the U.S. initiative, it will seek a leading role in any post-conflict political settlement.
- Russia has also convened regional powers in "Moscow format" talks, which are designed to produce a regional consensus on a solution to the conflict. One of Russia's key aims is to ensure that any peace agreement enhances its own geopolitical position in the region.
- Both the United States and Russia are committed to stability in Afghanistan; therefore, there has been some cooperation despite strained U.S.-Russian relations elsewhere. But although Russia's primary aim in Afghanistan is to ensure security on its southern flank, over the long term it also aims to ensure that the United States withdraws from the region.

### *Introduction*

As one of America's longest wars drifts to a possible peace deal, it is worth considering the position of another country with a bitter experience of military intervention in Afghanistan: Russia. Although Moscow has publicly supported the current U.S.-Taliban peace talks, it also has a very different perspective from the U.S. on the future of Afghanistan, influenced by geography and history. Russia's current strategic posture is informed by a long history of relations with Afghanistan and above all by the experience of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, a strategic and military failure that is still fresh in the collective memory of current Russian elites.

The Soviet war in Afghanistan ensured that post-Soviet Russia was cautious about resuming any major involvement in the Afghan conflict. Yet, as the U.S. has gradually moved to extricate itself from a long-running conflict, Russia has inevitably become more active in addressing the Afghan war. For Russia, Afghanistan will long remain a major security threat on its southern flank, even after any U.S. military withdrawal. Russia's long historical engagement in Afghanistan looks likely to continue long after U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops leave the region.

## *History*

From the very beginning of Russia's involvement in Afghanistan, the country was viewed through the lens of competition with the West. Russia's interest in Afghanistan dates at least to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Tsar Paul I dreamed of marching on British India through the Hindu Kush mountains. Napoleon urged Alexander I to invade India through Afghanistan, but these plans remained in the realm of fantasy until Russia began expanding into Central Asia in the 1830–1840s. British apprehension at the Russian advance across Central Asia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sparked decades of Anglo-Russian rivalry in Afghanistan, subsequently romanticized as the “Great Game.” The conflict abated after a border between Afghanistan and the Russian empire was finally delineated in 1895 by the Pamir Boundary Commission protocols, which established the border between Afghanistan and the Russian Empire. That border—now the boundary between Tajikistan and Afghanistan—remains fixed in Russian geographical thinking as the effective southern strategic frontier of Russia, although the legal frontier of the Russian Federation lies 2,500 kilometers to the north. The land beyond the Amu Darya River has always been viewed as a security threat: a source of crime, drugs, instability, Islamist radicalism, and Western interference.

The fear that Afghanistan might act as a launching pad for Western covert actions against the Soviet Union was one of the factors behind the Soviet military intervention in 1979.<sup>1</sup> The disastrous failure of the Soviet invasion had a powerful influence on Russia's strategic thinking, evident in Russia's aversion to deploying significant ground forces in combat zones in the post-Soviet period. The Afghan war also left a different legacy among Russian strategic thinkers and analysts in claims that the West turns a blind eye—or even provides covert support—to certain Islamist militant groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).<sup>2</sup> Such claims have their origins in Western backing for the *mujahideen* insurgency against the Soviet-backed government that lasted from 1979 to 1989, a war that reinforced Soviet and Russian fears of Central Asia and Afghanistan as the “soft underbelly” of the Soviet empire.

After the humiliating Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, Russia did its best to avoid any involvement in the civil war that followed. By the late 1990s, however, the rise of the Taliban—and links between international Islamist radical groups and Chechen rebel forces working inside Russia—forced Russia to back the Northern Alliance group of anti-Taliban forces, in cooperation with Iran and the now independent Central Asian states. Russia's antipathy toward the Taliban ensured its initial support for the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan in

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<sup>1</sup> Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89* (London: Profile Books, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> This view is firmly embedded in Russian strategic thinking and has been repeated by official spokespersons commenting on Afghanistan.

2001, but for much of the rest of that decade, Russia was reduced to the role of a spectator as a triumphant U.S. military overthrew the Taliban and appeared ready to succeed where the Soviet Union had failed.

However, as NATO and U.S. forces began to face increased armed opposition inside Afghanistan after 2005, Western efforts to transform Afghanistan into a stable, democratic state appeared increasingly likely to fail. Moreover, U.S. grand plans for a “Greater Central Asia” rekindled Russian fears of a destabilizing U.S. presence on its southern flank. From the late 2000s onward, Russia began to take a more active diplomatic role in Afghanistan, reflecting increasing concern in Moscow that the U.S. intervention might undermine Russia’s influence in Central Asia and the wider region. Over the following years, Russia slowly regained some of the expertise and networks it had abandoned in the 1990s. Moscow became increasingly vocal in criticizing a growing tide of drug smuggling out of Afghanistan—a large portion of which was directed to the Russian market—and the instability caused by the continuing insurgency inside Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

### *Russia’s New Policy*

In 2014, the bulk of NATO and U.S. troops withdrew from combat roles in Afghanistan, leaving behind a limited training and air-support mission. The drawdown posed both challenges and opportunities for Russia. On the one hand, Russian officials began to contemplate a possible full U.S. withdrawal, leaving behind a morass of instability on Russia’s southern flank. On the other hand, the withdrawal could be seen as a major failure of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The breakdown of Russia-Western relations during the Ukraine crisis in 2014 opened up Afghanistan as another front in the global competition between Russia and the West. Russian initiatives in Afghanistan provided another opportunity to challenge the West and reassert Russia as a dominant geopolitical player in the region.

There were different views in Moscow on the best policy. Many Russian officials remained nervous about a rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, fearful that the Taliban and other groups, such as Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP), would fill the vacuum. But other decision-makers viewed a U.S. presence in the region as a strategic threat to Russia and its sphere of influence. Russian special envoy Zamir Kabulov, in an interview in December 2016, warned about the long-term prospect of having nine U.S. military bases in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> An expert report argued, “Russia and the CSTO [Collective Security Treaty Organization] are forced to consider the military infrastructure of third countries in Afghanistan as potential military

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<sup>3</sup> Although the Russian authorities frequently claimed that the United States and NATO were not sufficiently active in tackling narcotics production and export, Russian law enforcement was also extremely selective in its counter-narcotics efforts. Many known organized crime groups and networks linked to Central Asian state security services appeared to be largely bypassed by Russian interdiction efforts.

<sup>4</sup> Mehmet Ozturk, “Exclusive Interview with Russian Diplomat Zamir Kabulov,” AA, December 31, 2016, <http://aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/exclusive-interview-with-russian-diplomat-zamir-kabulov/717573>.

threats...”<sup>5</sup> Afghanistan was emerging as a new front in the widening confrontation with the West.<sup>6</sup> In this view, Moscow’s Afghan policy should be aimed at “seizing the initiative from the West.”<sup>7</sup>

### *Dealing with the Taliban*

Both “stability-first” and geopolitical arguments were relevant in Russia’s most radical policy shift: its decision to initiate contact and engagement with the Taliban. Russia had been a strong opponent of the Taliban during the 1990s, but by the mid-2010s, both geopolitical and security concerns pushed Moscow to develop a new relationship with the militant group. Russia had three goals in reaching out to the Taliban. First, Russia was increasingly concerned by the rise of ISKP in Afghanistan, which seemed to pose a much more serious security threat to Russia and Central Asia than did the Taliban. In Moscow’s assessment, the Taliban had no wider regional or international goals that could threaten the Central Asian states or Russia itself, unlike ISKP, which posed a regional and global security threat. The Taliban was already fighting against ISKP; backing them to do more seemed a logical step. In Russia’s thinking, the Taliban could fight against the ISKP much more effectively than the U.S.-backed Afghan National Army. In 2016, Kabulov admitted contacts with the Taliban, and argued that the presence of ISKP in Afghanistan meant that “The Taliban are fighting in Afghanistan against the people we fought in Syria, that’s why our interests coincide.”<sup>8</sup>

There has been little reliable reporting on the nature of Russia’s relationship with the Taliban. Unconfirmed reports suggest Russian officials might have attended talks with the Taliban in Iran in May 2015.<sup>9</sup> During 2016, reports began to emerge from Afghanistan and the United States of more-substantive Russian funding and arms deliveries to elements of the Taliban.<sup>10</sup> In December 2016, the commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, publicly criticized the growing ties between Russia and Taliban.<sup>11</sup> Then–U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reiterated the allegations in August 2017.

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<sup>5</sup> “Rossiiskaya programma neutralizatsii “afganskoi ugrozy” stranam ODKB,” *Afghanistan.ru*, January 31, 2017, <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/106889.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Arkady Dubnov, “Plokhaya igra. Kak Afghanistan idyet v katastrofe,” blog post, Carnegie Moscow Center, April 27, 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/68795>.

<sup>7</sup> Igor Subbotin, “Afganskaya initsiyativa pozvolit Kremliyu nadavit’ na Washington,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 19, 2018, [www.ng.ru/world/2018-01-19/6\\_7154\\_afgan.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2018-01-19/6_7154_afgan.html).

<sup>8</sup> Noor Zahid, “Afghan Lawmakers to Investigate Growing Ties Between Taliban, Russia and Iran,” *Voice of America*, December 5, 2016, <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-iran-russia-taliban/3624592.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Ayaz Ahmed, “Russia’s New Great Game,” *The News International*, April 5, 2017, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/196521-Russias-new-great-game>.

<sup>10</sup> David Lewis, “Why Russia is Back in Afghanistan,” *The Conversation*, November 14, 2017, <http://theconversation.com/why-russia-is-back-in-afghanistan-86663>.

<sup>11</sup> Speaking in December 2016, General John W. Nicholson, Jr., the commander of Resolute Support and U.S. Forces Afghanistan, said that “Russia has overtly lent legitimacy to the Taliban, [but] this public legitimacy that Russia lends to the Taliban is not based on fact, but it is used as a way to essentially undermine the Afghan government and the NATO effort and bolster the belligerents” See John W. Nicholson, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” U.S. Department of Defense, December 2, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1019029/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-nicholson-in-the-pentagon-brief>.

These claims were regularly denied by Russian officials, but experts were more candid. In an interview, Russian foreign policy analyst Sergei Karaganov admitted,

We are playing a very complicated game—sometimes we support somebody, sometimes we help somebody else. . . . If needed we will support Taliban, if needed, we will support anti-Taliban forces. But they should not spread the ‘Afghan disease’ or terrorism disease to the neighbouring areas, be that India or Central Asia.<sup>12</sup>

### *Regional Diplomacy*

The second strand of Russia’s new Afghan policy was a series of diplomatic initiatives at the regional level. Russian analysts and officials argued that it was impossible to defeat the Taliban by military means. The only solution was through political negotiations. But a political settlement needed a regional consensus, because all the regional powers supported proxies inside Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> Russia reached out beyond its traditional allies in the region—India and the Central Asian states, and, to a lesser extent, Iran—and began to build new ties with Pakistan and deepen its partnership with China.

On December 27, 2016, Russian, Pakistani, and Chinese representatives met in Moscow for a trilateral summit on Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> India and the Afghan government were unhappy at being excluded and Moscow widened the format of talks in 2017 to a structure it dubbed the “Moscow format.”<sup>15</sup> In February 2017, Russia hosted representatives from China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan for talks in Moscow in a wider format.<sup>16</sup> Further talks were held in Moscow in April 2017, with the format expanded further to include the five Central Asian states.<sup>17</sup>

### *Peace Talks, Moscow-Style*

Russia’s diplomatic breakthrough came more than a year later, in November 2018, when it hosted a further Moscow format–style summit of regional powers alongside an intra-Afghan meeting that included the Taliban. Although the Afghan government refused to attend officially, some members of the semi-official High Peace Council were in the room. Again, there were no major advances, but the meeting offered a significant public stage for the Taliban. U.S. scholar Stephen Blank claimed that “Russia’s support enabled the Taliban to stage a major propaganda

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<sup>12</sup> Sergei Karaganov, “China and Russia Are Quasi-Allies . . . On Strategic Affairs Russia and India Have Serious Conversations Only at the Top Level,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 2, 2018, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/China-and-Russia-are-quasi-allies--On-strategic-affairs-Russia-and-India-have-serious-conversations->.

<sup>13</sup> See Ekaterina Stepanova, “Russia’s Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Contexts,” *Russie*, NEI Reports, No. 23, May 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Hobson, “Russia, Pakistan, China warn of increased Islamic State threat in Afghanistan,” *Reuters*, December 27, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-russia-pakistan-c-idUSKBN14G19I>.

<sup>15</sup> “Afganistan priglasili k uchastiyu v svoei sudbe,” *Kommersant*, February 8, 2017, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3212776>.

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Skosyrev, “Rossiya pytaetsya sygrat’ rol’ posredenika v Afganistane,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 16, 2017, [http://www.ng.ru/world/2017-02-16/7\\_6930\\_afgan.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2017-02-16/7_6930_afgan.html).

<sup>17</sup> “Russia to Host Talks on Afghan Conflict,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, March 19, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-afghanistan-central-asia-china-pakistan-india-iran/28378061.html>.

coup” and “made the Taliban-U.S. negotiations even more difficult.”<sup>18</sup> Russian expert Arkady Dubnov called it “pragmatic blackmail,” in which the Taliban used Russia to remind the United States that it had other geopolitical options.<sup>19</sup>

Russia’s relative success in bringing the Taliban to Moscow in November was accompanied by more criticism of U.S. policy. In a symbolic move, Russia voted against the annual United Nations General Assembly resolution on Afghanistan in December 2018, which had passed unanimously in previous years, arguing that it painted too positive a picture of the situation in Afghanistan, whereas—in the Russian view—“the situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating due to the activities of certain States.”<sup>20</sup> This negative official commentary from Russia continued in response to reports of a breakthrough in peace talks between U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban leadership in December 2018 and the announcement of a partial U.S. troop withdrawal thereafter. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in an official statement in January 2019, criticized U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and called the talks “a move which was considered an acknowledgment of [America’s] own defeat.” The statement also revived conspiracy theories about U.S. covert support to ISKP.<sup>21</sup> Speaking in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on February 5, 2019, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov followed up with criticisms of the U.S. peace talks, claiming that the United States was trying to control the whole process and conduct it behind closed doors, while “countries of the region, who are far from indifferent to what will happen to Afghanistan, remain in the dark about what plans our American partners may be developing.”<sup>22</sup>

While criticizing the U.S. initiative, Russia also pursued its own negotiation channel. On February 5 and 6, 2019, Russia hosted what was termed the inaugural meeting of an “Intra-Afghan Dialogue” in Moscow.<sup>23</sup> The Russian government denied any official involvement in the event, which was described as a meeting organized by the Afghan diaspora in Moscow and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries (the collective of the majority of former Soviet states), although, in reality it was clearly a Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiative.<sup>24</sup> The event was criticized by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, but attended by traditionally pro-Russian

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Blank, “Russia Reacts to U.S. Afghanistan Policy,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 16, no. 3, (January 16, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-reacts-to-us-afghanistan-policy>.

<sup>19</sup> Igor Subbotin, “Taliby igrayut na protivorechiyakh Moskvyy i Washingtona,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 5, 2019, [http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-02-05/6\\_7500\\_afgan.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-02-05/6_7500_afgan.html).

<sup>20</sup> UN, “General Assembly Adopts Resolution Pledging Continued Support to Afghanistan in Rebuilding State, Eliminating Terrorism, Narcotics,” December 6, 2018, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/ga12100.doc.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Comment by the Information and Press Department on the U.S.’s Preparations to Launch an Information Campaign to Discredit Russia’s Policy Related to Afghanistan,” January 16, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> “Sergey Lavrov: Peregovory mezhdy USA i ‘Talibanom’ vyzivayut obespekennost’ u stran regiona,” *Afghanistan.ru*, February 5, 2019, <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/126588.html>.

<sup>23</sup> “Taliban, Afghan Delegations Hail ‘Successful’ Moscow Meeting, Pledge to Meet Again,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-afghan-delegation-say-talks-to-continue/29756223.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Andrei Serenko, “‘Mezhafganskii dialog’ nachnetsya v Moskve,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 4, 2019; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement denying an official role for Moscow, but also criticizing attempts to undermine the event; see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Kommentarii Departamenta informatsii i pechati MID Rossii v svyazi s provedeniyem v Moskve vstrechi predstavitelei vedushchikh politicheskikh sil Afganistana pod egidoi afganskoi diaspori,” February 4, 2019, [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3500278](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3500278).

figures, such as former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, and by other powerbrokers, including former Afghan National Security Adviser, Hanif Atmar, Atta Mohammad Nur, and others. A ten-member Taliban delegation also attended, led by Sher Abbas Stanikzai, head of the Taliban political office in Qatar.<sup>25</sup>

The meeting produced a joint communiqué in which the different parties agreed to support ongoing talks in Qatar and general principles of a possible peace settlement, with a reported “near-consensus” on the need for complete withdrawal of foreign forces from the country.<sup>26</sup> From February 2019 onward, Russia took a more positive view—at least in public—of the wider U.S.-led peace talks. The MFA reduced public criticism of the U.S. and engaged in a new trilateral diplomatic format, in which Khalilzad and Kabulov were joined by Chinese special envoy for Afghanistan affairs Deng Xijun. They met in Moscow in April, in July in Beijing, and in Moscow again in October. Pakistan also joined the trilateral group in July and in October to form what Russia termed a “Troika-plus” format.<sup>27</sup>

Russia also continued its own diplomatic initiatives. Moscow hosted a further intra-Afghan meeting in May 2019, ostensibly to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, but also designed to promote intra-Afghan dialogue and insert Russia into the peace process. Moscow received a Taliban delegation in September, a week after the United States announced a suspension of peace talks. The visit was viewed as a symbolic move by the Taliban to remind the U.S. of the group’s other geopolitical options.<sup>28</sup> But Russian officials publicly welcomed an announcement by the United States in late November 2019 that peace talks would resume with the Taliban.<sup>29</sup> In public, at least, Russia backed the negotiation process and welcomed an apparent breakthrough in U.S.-Taliban talks when the two sides agreed to a tentative peace deal in February 2020.

### ***Russia and Afghan Politics***

Although Russia was no longer center stage in the peace process during the U.S.-Taliban talks, Russian officials quietly continued their multilevel policy in Afghanistan, combining three strands: active engagement on the ground with influential powerbrokers and political parties, including the Taliban; maintaining and expanding its security dominance in Central Asia; and at the wider regional and global levels, pursuing a key role in regional diplomacy and in relations with the United States and China. If U.S. policy was at least partly dictated by the cycles of U.S. political elections, Russia was playing a longer game, recognizing that Afghanistan would remain a central challenge for Russian strategy for the foreseeable future. Consequently, Russia

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Higgins and Mujib Mashal, “In Moscow, Afghan Peace Talks without the Afghan Government,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/04/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-russia-talks-russia.html>.

<sup>26</sup> “Taliban, Afghan Delegations Hail ‘Successful’ Moscow Meeting, Pledge to Meet Again,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-afghan-delegation-say-talks-to-continue/29756223.html>.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of State, “U.S., Russia, China and Pakistan Joint Statement on Peace in Afghanistan,” October 28, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-russia-china-and-pakistan-joint-statement-on-peace-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>28</sup> “Taliban Meets Russian Envoy in Moscow After U.S. Talks Collapse,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, September 13, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-meets-russian-envoy-moscow/30163211.html>.

<sup>29</sup> “Russia Welcomes Trump’s Remarks on Renewing Negotiations with Taliban, Says Envoy,” TASS, November 29, 2019, <https://tass.com/politics/1094185>.

seemed unlikely to challenge directly any U.S.-Taliban deal, but would seek to ensure an influential position in any period of post-conflict political settlement.

To maintain influence, Moscow continued to develop existing ties to many of the anti-Ghani opposition figures, including Russia's traditional allies in northern Afghanistan. Arkady Dubnov of the Carnegie Moscow Center argues that the "northern provinces of Afghanistan should be recognized as almost a zone of special interests for Russia."<sup>30</sup> Many of those who participated in the Moscow intra-Afghan dialogue meeting in February 2019, such as Ismail Khan and Atta Mohammed Noor, were once members of the Northern Alliance, the Tajik- and Uzbek-dominated opposition to the Taliban in the 1990s.<sup>31</sup> Russia made a conscious effort to reach out to Pashtun leaders after 2015, in particular with Hamid Karzai, but its political networks were still strongest in the north.

By contrast, Moscow had an increasingly strained relationship with President Ghani. Russia would probably have preferred to back Hanif Atmar for the presidency, but he pulled out of the race early in the campaign. On February 18, 2020, Ghani was declared the narrow winner of a highly-contested election, but Russia offered little in the way of congratulations. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman pointedly noted that his rival—Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah—did not recognize the election results and had announced a parallel government.<sup>32</sup> Moscow had previously cultivated ties with Abdullah Abdullah: Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev had a well-publicized meeting with him at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in November 2019.<sup>33</sup> Russia has close ties to several members of Afghanistan's Council of Presidential Candidates, which on February 20, 2020, called for the election results to be disregarded.<sup>34</sup>

In April 2020, Russian official criticism became more pronounced, as the peace talks appeared to run into difficulties and the political stand-off continued. MFA spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused the Americans of playing a role in exacerbating the political tensions after their *de facto* recognition of Ghani's victory and accused the Ghani administration of delaying the prisoner swap that was a crucial part of the peace deal.<sup>35</sup>

After a power-sharing agreement was finally reached between Abdullah and Ghani in May 2020, Russia was involved in a flurry of diplomatic initiatives to try to kickstart the peace process. Russia convened a meeting of special envoys on Afghanistan from Russia, Pakistan, Iran, and China on 18 May, which welcomed the agreement and expressed hope that the deal would expedite intra-Afghan negotiations. Russia followed up with talks with envoys from the United

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<sup>30</sup> Igor Subbotin, "Taliby igrayut na protivorechiyakh Moskvye i Vashingtona," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 5, 2019, [http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-02-05/6\\_7500\\_afgan.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-02-05/6_7500_afgan.html).

<sup>31</sup> Igor Subbotin, February 5, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> "Afghanistan-Russia Urges 'Effective Solution' to Afghan Election Dispute," *Menafn*, February 21, 2020, <https://menafn.com/1099740983/Afghanistan-Russia-Urges-Effective-Solution-to-Afghan-Election-Dispute>.

<sup>33</sup> Russian Government, "Dmitry Medvedev Meets with Chief Executive of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Abdullah Abdullah," November 1, 2019, <http://government.ru/en/news/38250/>.

<sup>34</sup> "Afghanistan-Russia Urges 'Effective Solution' to Afghan Election Dispute," 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Igor Subbotin, "Afganistan udivlen rezkostyu rossiiskoi diplomatii," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, April 19, 2020, [http://www.ng.ru/world/2020-04-19/1\\_7847\\_afganistan.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2020-04-19/1_7847_afganistan.html); "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova," Moscow, April 17, 2020.



States, China, and Pakistan on 4 June and then took part in a U.S.-Russia teleconference with acting foreign minister Hanif Atmar on 15 June. The U.S. and Russia called for an immediate meeting between negotiating teams to facilitate an early start for intra-Afghan negotiations.<sup>36</sup> The outcome of Afghanistan's peace talks remained uncertain, but Russia was back at the heart of the process.

## *Conclusion*

Despite the end of Russian and Soviet rule over Central Asia, Moscow continues to view Central Asia's borders with Afghanistan as of vital strategic interest to Russia. Its perception of Afghanistan is informed by a long history of Russian involvement in the region, which has ensured that Russian strategic culture is replete with stereotypes about the kinds of security threats posed by the Afghan conflict. In particular, Moscow's historical perception of Afghanistan is as a launching pad for Western geopolitical interests in the wider Central Asian region, a view that dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century but was strongly reinforced by the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. Consequently, many of Russia's genuine security concerns in relation to Afghanistan are strongly colored by a geopolitical reading of the conflict.

It is inevitable that current Russian policy in Afghanistan continues to be influenced by the experience and memory of the Soviet intervention there. Russian policy in Afghanistan was affected for a long time by the shadow of the Soviet defeat and a humiliating withdrawal in 1989, which became symbolic of the disastrous end of the Soviet Union itself.<sup>37</sup> In 2004, Russian President Vladimir Putin marked a shift in this narrative, arguing that Soviet troops had served honorably in Afghanistan, and that the decision to invade—even if mistaken—was an understandable reaction to a threat to the Soviet Union's southern border.<sup>38</sup> More recently, a full-scale revisionist history has emerged, in which the Russian State Duma has demanded a reappraisal of the negative judgment of its predecessor on the Soviet intervention.

It is contemporary geopolitics—rather than historical memory—that drives Russia to compete with the West in Afghanistan. Russian policy ultimately aims to limit Western strategic influence in a broad arc from Syria and Iran through to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and the Central Asian states in what Moscow increasingly refers to as “Greater Eurasia.” However, Russia really does not have the tools to maintain stability across this region alone. Experts, such as Andrei Sirenko, argue that “Russian diplomacy on the Afghan issue places most attention on informational and PR [public relations] activities, but so far cannot boast of any real, long-term projects with some perspective of success.”<sup>39</sup> Dubnov concludes that Moscow lacks credible policy options and has no real instruments to influence the situation.<sup>40</sup> Many Russian officials will be satisfied to see the last U.S. troops leave Afghanistan after nearly two decades, but they

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<sup>36</sup> “US, Russia Expect Immediate Start to Initial Intra-Afghan Talks,” *ToloNews*, June 2020.

<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/us-russia-expect%20immediate-start-initial-intra-afghan-talks>.

<sup>37</sup> On the original Soviet intervention, see Braithewaite, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> “Putin: Pora prekratit' politicheskuyu voznyu vokrug afganskoi voyny,” *Grani.ru*, February 19, 2004,

<https://graniru.org/War/m.60874.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Andrei Sirenko: “V afganskoi politike moskve stoit usilit' slova deistviyami,” *Politrus*, April 23, 2017,

<http://www.politrus.com/2017/08/23/afghanistan-russia-3/>.

<sup>40</sup> Igor Subbotin, “Rossiya ukreplyaet pozitsii v Tsentral'noi Azii iz-za konflikta v Afghanistane,” *Afghanistan.ru*, August 19, 2017, <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/113467.html>.

are also very aware that a post-American Afghanistan poses significant risks to regional stability that Russia is ill-equipped to manage alone.

## *About the Author*

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***Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI):*** *This program of research, led by the GCMC and funded by RSI (U.S. Department of Defense effort to enhance understanding of the Russian way of war in order to inform strategy and planning), employs in-depth case studies to better understand Russian strategic behavior in order to mitigate miscalculation in relations.*

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