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The Rising Value of Russian Security Provision in Central Asia following the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

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Abstract

Politico-security support has always been a major element of Russia's relationship with most of the post-Soviet Central Asian republics. The U.S. withdrawal from, and the Taliban's seizure of control over most of, Afghanistan has thus likely increased its value in the eyes of the region's incumbent regimes. The Russian military's potential to deter armed groups considering an incursion into Central Asia also has value for extra-regional players, notably China.

The dramatic imagery and poignant human stories that dominated global media coverage of the chaotic final stage of the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, which played out against the backdrop of the Taliban's rapid seizure of Kabul, resonated around the globe in August 2021. This spectacle and storyline received significant attention in the Russian media, refracted through the—albeit faded—memory of the end of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, which imbued Afghanistan with great symbolic significance as a place in which the hubris of great powers comes unstuck. The speed and dramatic nature of these events nonetheless seemed to catch the Russian government off guard, like most of its counterparts around the world. And, like all governments that have some form of political, economic or security stake in Afghan stability and governance, the new politico-security situation has left Moscow to ponder various uncertainties and dilemmas. The prospect of ongoing internal armed political contestation and the economic impact of the abrupt end to international aid have generated fears about the rise of Islamic State (IS) affiliate groups and illegal opium trade networks, with negative potential consequences for Russia and the Central Asian republics.

Changes in political context that make challenges appear more urgent may serve as strategic resources through which actors can seek to address wider goals. The exacerbated concerns about potential spillovers from the instability in Afghanistan into post-Soviet Central Asia and beyond have served as a reminder of the Russian state's role as the primary external provider of hard security in the region. This role has significant value for the incumbent regimes in Central Asia and other actors with significant economic stakes in the region, most notably China. Of course, the fact that Russia can offer politico-military support vis-à-vis potential instability in Afghanistan does not necessarily mean that any of these actors will seek closer relations with the Russian government, since no such engagement takes place in

a political vacuum. The ramifications of the decision by the Putin regime to launch a military offensive against Ukraine in late February will likely impact on the role it is both able and permitted to play as a security provider in Central Asia.

Bulwark against Territorial Incursions and Regime Change

The prospect of prolonged internal instability, power struggles, and free reign for IS affiliate groups in northern Afghanistan presents a number of tangible security dilemmas for the Russian state. These threats are even more acutely felt in the Central Asian republics, three of which border northern Afghanistan. The memory of territorial incursions and raids by militant groups launched from northern Afghanistan into Uzbek and Kyrgyz territory in the late 1990s, as well as of the militants who operated between Afghanistan and Tajikistan during the Tajik Civil War earlier in that decade, remains relevant to these regimes' politico-security thinking. As such, cooperation in mitigating such risks represents an avenue through which the Russian government can consolidate its relationship with—and influence in—these states.

Albeit to differing extents, the Russian government has maintained strong ties with all the post-Soviet Central Asian republics since 1991. Within these relationships, securing the region's border with Afghanistan has always been relatively high on the agenda. However, the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, especially during the phase of greatest U.S. government and military engagement with the region in the mid-2000s, limited the value of the military support that the Russian government offered these regimes. The U.S. military withdrawal and the rapid re-emergence of almost country-wide Taliban control has likely served to recalibrate the Central Asian regimes's perceptions of the value of the politico-military support that the Russian government can provide.

The Russian military operates facilities on the territory of both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, maintaining

a troop presence at both sites. More significantly, the Russian government is credibly able to promise that it can, in a short timeframe, mobilise other military assets not otherwise available to the Central Asian regimes to counteract anything that the incumbent leaders interpret as a threat to their states or to the security of their regimes. This was illustrated on a small scale by the role that Russian military strategic transport, as well as civilian aircraft, played in evacuating not only Russian citizens, but also Tajik, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Uzbek citizens from Kabul as the Taliban reasserted its control over the Afghan capital in August 2021. The value of such rapid force deployment to the survival of the Central Asian regimes was likely also brought home to them by the (unrelated) rapid deployment of Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) troops to Kazakhstan amid internal unrest in early January 2022.

In the period surrounding and since the Taliban's return to power in late August 2021, the Russian military has been involved in a series of military exercises on the territory of three Central Asian republics. In August, the Russian military's 201st Motor Rifle Brigade, permanently based in Tajikistan, undertook first its own exercises and then joint exercises with the Tajik military. This was followed up by joint Russian–Uzbek exercises and, perhaps most notably, trilateral Russia–Uzbek–Tajik exercises along Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan. The holding of a trilateral exercise illustrates that the Russian government may be able to facilitate joint military activity, albeit very limited in scope, between the Central Asian republics, irrespective of the factious relationships between certain regimes. In each case, these military exercises were transparently aimed at developing joint readiness to repel militant incursions and, specifically, to deliver a clear political message to militant groups watching from the Afghan side of the border that any attempt to encroach on the territory of these states by force might be met by an overwhelming Russian military response.

Alongside exercises, the Russian government is funding the modernisation of its military base in Tajikistan and construction of a new border guard post for the Tajik border guard service in Shamsiddin Shohin. Both efforts to enhance security on the Tajik–Afghan border are understood as having taken on greater urgency in light of the risks posed by instability in Afghanistan.

Along similar lines, the Taliban's return to almost full control of Afghanistan served as a stimulus for the CSTO, the Russian-led military-security multilateral organisation aimed primarily at Central Asia. From its inception in the early 2000s, one of the CSTO's primary *raison d'être* has been to prevent instability in Afghanistan from spilling over into Central Asia. Although the CSTO has undertaken annual exercises aimed at coun-

teracting the flow of illegal narcotics from Afghanistan and its permanent forces have conducted exercises focused on military incursions from Afghanistan, the CSTO's functional role in counteracting Afghan spill-over has in practise been limited. As yet, the dramatic August 2021 events in Afghanistan have not changed that. The immediacy of the concerns these events generated have, however, served to animate the rhetorical rationale for the CSTO as a mechanism for coordinating a region-wide response to Afghan instability.

In early July, Tajikistan called on the CSTO to adopt measures that would increase Tajikistan's capacity to defend its southern borders. The Russian head of the CSTO Joint Staff responded that the CSTO has long supported the development of the Tajik border security service, which he claimed was capable of handling the current situation. However, it is possible that this request will kick-start the implementation of previously agreed—but long delayed—CSTO infrastructural development programs focused on Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan. Since August 2021, the CSTO has held multiple exercises on the Tajik–Afghan border, as well as in Kyrgyzstan, oriented toward counteracting militants. And in October 2021, the Russian deputy foreign minister, Andrei Rudenko, indicated that Russia would provide Tajikistan with “all necessary assistance [regarding the spillover of instability from Afghanistan]...., both within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and bilaterally.”

Although it already enjoyed strong ties with the Central Asian republics, the Russian government's strong show of military-backed political solidarity with the region's regimes since the U.S. withdrawal elevated their concerns about instability in Afghanistan is symbolically significant, coming as it does against the backdrop of a decade in which the Central Asian governments have established extensive ties with other external actors, primarily China. None of these other extra-regional actors currently offers the type of politico-military support that the Russian state—and the multilateral frameworks it leads—can. More importantly, Moscow can plausibly claim it is willing to provide such support, an offer that the incumbent regimes likely consider a necessary—if problematic—one amid concerns about the spread of militancy from Afghanistan that may manifest in challenges to their survival and state stability.

Distinct Roles of Russia and China towards the Same Aim in Central Asia

At present, the Russia government's material capability and willingness to provide direct military support—specifically to Tajikistan, but also to the other Central Asian republics—vis-à-vis insecurity in Afghanistan is likely regarded by most other external actors with interests in

Central Asia as a net benefit. Most notably, it remains unclear whether the Chinese state and state-backed companies that have made significant investments in infrastructure, energy, and businesses across the region are willing to intervene directly to protect these investments in the event of security breakdowns. Although it is developing a more direct military and security role in Tajikistan, the Chinese military still lacks the infrastructure necessary to react quickly to a major militant incursion from Afghanistan. To at least some degree, therefore, the Chinese government is content for the

Russian military to play such a role, as its main concern is maintaining political stability in the region to protect its financial investments, allow it to retain political influence within the Central Asian states, and prevent militants from infiltrating Xinjiang Province via Central Asia. Increased political influence for Moscow in Central Asia that results from the Russian military's role as the primary security guarantor against spillover from instability in Afghanistan is thus unlikely to concern Beijing unduly.

About the Author

Stephen Aris is a co-editor of the Russian Analytical Digest.

ANALYSIS

A Resurgent Threat? Islamism in Central Asia since the Taliban Takeover

By Vassily Klimentov

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Abstract

The article discusses the danger of militant Islamism spreading to Central Asia from Afghanistan against the background of the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. It argues that although that danger has increased, the threat ultimately remains limited because the Taliban's attention is on Afghanistan and more radical and transnational armed groups in Afghanistan, such as the Islamic State, have been weakened in recent years.

The Taliban conquered half of Afghanistan in July 2021. By mid-August, they had occupied Kabul, forcing pro-American Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to flee to the United Arab Emirates. The takeover happened even before the US completed its withdrawal. Kabul had been worse than Saigon.¹

Despite their shock at the rapid collapse, few Western, Russian or other observers and policymakers had doubted that the Taliban would ultimately achieve victory in Afghanistan. Ghani's regime had suffered from endemic corruption, dependence upon Western military and economic support, and weak political legitimacy—and, overall, was unable to guarantee Afghans' security and improve their livelihoods. To many Afghans fatigued by years of war, the Taliban appeared no better or worse than the pro-US authorities. As the Taliban marched on the capital, few—even among the pro-Ghani military, militias, and local authorities—rose to fight them.

The Taliban's victory profoundly modified the geopolitical context in Central and South Asia. It was, however, a change for which regional powers had been preparing for some time. In the 1990s, Russia, Iran, India, and the five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) had backed the Northern Alliance—a coalition of Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara (Afghan Shia) armed groups led by Ahmad Shah Masoud—against the Taliban. The Taliban, for its part, had harbored al-Qaeda, threatened to export militant Islamism to destabilize its neighbors, and was one of just two governments ever to recognize Chechnya's independence. Moscow had thus threatened the Taliban with airstrikes even before 9/11. When the US intervened in Afghanistan, Russia and the Central Asian states (almost) wholeheartedly supported it. This support, however, turned lukewarm by the 2010s: Russia and its allies resented the US foreign policy of pro-

¹ <https://theconversation.com/from-saigon-to-the-mujahideen-the-many-historical-echoes-of-the-fall-of-kabul-166600>.