

# Beware What You Wish For. Moscow's Joy over U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan May Be Premature

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Articles & Testimony

**The coming violence could spill over into Russia, perhaps emboldening terrorist groups to recruit radicalized Muslims there.**

The debacle of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has clearly delighted the Kremlin. Russian state-run media reacted with open glee. “America no longer matters,” [declared \(https://www.thedailybeast.com/russia-is-already-cozying-up-to-the-taliban-as-kabul-spirals\)](https://www.thedailybeast.com/russia-is-already-cozying-up-to-the-taliban-as-kabul-spirals) one Russian political scientist on the state TV show *60 Minutes*. Speaking to students in Vladivostok on September 1 to mark the start of the school year, Vladimir Putin [said \(https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/09/01/putin-says-us-presence-in-afghanistan-ended-in-tragedies-a74947\)](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/09/01/putin-says-us-presence-in-afghanistan-ended-in-tragedies-a74947) the U.S. had tried for twenty years “to impose their norms and standards of life” on Afghanistan, which only led to “tragedies and losses.”

The Kremlin has been working for years to increase its geopolitical footprint in the region and appears to see a boost to its regional standing at U.S. expense. The fact of the matter is, the American and NATO presence in Central Asia has always [worried Moscow \(https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-kyrgyzstan-usa-russia-sb/russia-plays-tricky-game-with-u-s-over-kyrgyzstan-base-idUKTRE5133GJ20090204\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-kyrgyzstan-usa-russia-sb/russia-plays-tricky-game-with-u-s-over-kyrgyzstan-base-idUKTRE5133GJ20090204) at least as much as the threat from the Taliban, and Putin’s support for U.S.-led efforts in Afghanistan was [conditional \(https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-eu-russia-us-afghanistan-020609-2009feb06-story.html\)](https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-eu-russia-us-afghanistan-020609-2009feb06-story.html). Still, in this context, the U.S. withdrawal raises deeper questions about the security consequences for Russia, Central Asia, and beyond.

## Stronger Position in Central Asia

Russia remains the key guarantor of security in Central Asia. Furthermore, Moscow has strengthened its position in the region in recent years. The Kremlin has increased regional security drills, both bilaterally and through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Moscow remains the largest supplier of weaponry to the region. The 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, where Moscow retains approximately 7,000 troops, remains one of Russia’s most important bases abroad. Approximately two years ago, Moscow [began expanding \(https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-military-base-in-kyrgyzstan-under-focus-at-putin-jeenbekov-talks/29847265.html\)](https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-military-base-in-kyrgyzstan-under-focus-at-putin-jeenbekov-talks/29847265.html). Russia’s airbase in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, while Kazakhstan, home to the largest ethnic Russian minority in the region, remains the largest buyer of Russian arms. Kazakhstan also hosts the [Baikonur](#)

**Cosmodrome** (<https://www.space.com/33947-baikonur-cosmodrome.html>), the launch site for Soviet and Russian space missions. In August 2018, Afghan officials said the Tajik government had launched lethal airstrikes into Afghanistan that hit Taliban militants—a **mysterious incident** (<https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/23184/russia-denies-flying-mystery-air-strike-on-afghan-border-claims-black-choppers-still-aiding-isis>) that both the Tajik and Russian governments went to great lengths to deny. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have also **improved ties** (<https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/the-implications-of-tightening-russia-uzbekistan-ties/>) with Moscow **since 2016** (<https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/russias-security-inroads-with-turkmenistan/>) with regard to both security and economic cooperation. In March 2016, Moscow pardoned 95 percent of Uzbekistan's debt to Russia, which put an end to a longstanding dispute and enabled increased trade. And in November 2017, Russia and Turkmenistan signed an agreement on strategic partnership. To be sure, Moscow's relations with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan will remain more complicated than with the other three Central Asian governments, but less so than before 2016.

To be sure, China has increased its economic footprint and boosted arms sales in Central Asia in recent years—an engagement that is only likely to grow. Still, at present, Beijing recognizes that it is a relative newcomer to the region, and like Moscow would like to limit American influence in Central Asia. Moreover, in recent years, U.S. military and political engagement in the region has decreased, and if Central Asian countries decide to hold exercises with the U.S., Moscow (not to mention Beijing and Tehran) will pressure them against it. At least in the short term, it seems Moscow will be able to **exert control** (<https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-58492888>) in the region and perhaps work more with Beijing. That Russia (like China) **kept its embassy open** (<https://www.npr.org/2021/08/16/1028198482/the-russian-consulate-in-kabul-is-now-under-protection-of-the-taliban>) in Afghanistan suggests that Putin had felt relatively secure in the Russian position.

## Control of Refugee Flows

**P**utin's **recent blasting** (<https://www.interfax.ru/world/785883>) of Western states as taking a “humiliating approach” to temporarily hosting Afghan refugees in Central Asia speaks volumes about what steps he plans to take. Moscow, he said, does not want “militants appearing [in Russia] again under the guise of refugees.” Given Russia's buttressed security posture in Central Asia, it is likely that at least in the near future Putin has the means to pressure Central Asian countries to limit the number of refugees they receive, even as the flow of illegal refugees is likely to increase.

Then there is the issue of **migration to Russia** (<https://voicesoncentralasia.org/central-asian-migration-to-russia-legalization-in-2020/>). If Central Asian countries accept many Afghan refugees, they may then find their way to Russia as migrant workers. On the one hand, these governments may welcome Afghan refugees' moving to Russia to work. On the other, if Afghans compete with Central Asians for jobs in Russia, it could add economic pressure for the Central Asian states. This outcome may add to reasons for them to limit how many Afghan refugees they will take.

## A Surge in Narcotrafficking?

In the past, narcotrafficking from Afghanistan through Central Asia presented a major challenge for Russia, which continues to struggle with high drug use and drug-related crimes, according to **official statistics** (<https://fsin.gov.ru/structure/inspector/iao/statistika/Kratkaya%20har-ka%20UIS/>). Afghanistan, for its part, **according to the UN** ([https://wdr.unodc.org/uploads/wdr2020/documents/WDR20\\_Booklet\\_3.pdf](https://wdr.unodc.org/uploads/wdr2020/documents/WDR20_Booklet_3.pdf)), accounted for about 84 percent of global opium production between 2015 and 2020, and this production is only likely to continue. That said, in recent years, Russia's position as a market for drugs coming out of Afghanistan appears to have decreased. Most drugs from Afghanistan go to Europe, and more go to Iran, where the penalties may be more severe but it is possible to get a better price and the route itself is faster. The 2019 UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report **notes** (<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr2021.html>) a decline in opiate trafficking from Afghanistan along the so-called “northern” route (through Central Asia to Russia). The report further notes that if in 2008 “approximately 10 percent of morphine and heroin intercepted globally was seized along the northern route,” by 2017 this number fell to 1 percent. Meanwhile another recent UNODC report **found** ([https://wdr.unodc.org/uploads/wdr2020/documents/WDR20\\_Booklet\\_3.pdf](https://wdr.unodc.org/uploads/wdr2020/documents/WDR20_Booklet_3.pdf)), “Opiate trafficking along the northern route to the Russian Federation is on the decrease, but is on the increase to Western Europe.” The UN explains this shift in part by an increase in border seizures, and with higher demand for “krokodil,” a synthetic and cheaper heroin-like drug. These most recent findings suggest that Russia may continue to struggle with drug use, but a major surge in drug trafficking as a result of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan could affect Europe more than Russia, something that, in private, could only delight

## Engagement with the Taliban

In this context, the biggest issue at present seems to be Moscow's engagement with the Taliban. Indeed, in Afghanistan Moscow acted simultaneously as a peacemaker, military partner, and supporter of terrorism (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/01/russia-afghansitan-united-states-bountygate/>). This approach reflects the longstanding internal Kremlin contradiction of both relying on Western assistance and working to destabilize the West due to resentment of its primacy.

Some reports suggest ([https://url.emailprotection.link/?aVm2jPusi4xc9kvWco5ptGbrfOka73osP3B3il44hXIfYaHCXu3KgUKNHA-3h7PCWNVg9eb2zIazmGLWkAAM1ChdfGiDU1Btx1nrcNB88bjbnWM5EUANBYW1e-D88jIBFmQNBglfrLd9Za\\_zU4OHGB1ogWlxoh6LdNnQb4NvCJKfg5KAks\\_ncxyJmiFUyPQp1HmuOU30F3Fdnxfo9qDOIDQ~~~](https://url.emailprotection.link/?aVm2jPusi4xc9kvWco5ptGbrfOka73osP3B3il44hXIfYaHCXu3KgUKNHA-3h7PCWNVg9eb2zIazmGLWkAAM1ChdfGiDU1Btx1nrcNB88bjbnWM5EUANBYW1e-D88jIBFmQNBglfrLd9Za_zU4OHGB1ogWlxoh6LdNnQb4NvCJKfg5KAks_ncxyJmiFUyPQp1HmuOU30F3Fdnxfo9qDOIDQ~~~))) Moscow had begun talking to the Taliban as early as 2007. A senior Taliban official said about these early contacts, "We needed support to get rid of the United States and its allies in Afghanistan and Russia wanted all foreign troops to leave Afghanistan as quickly as possible." Moscow says contacts only began in 2014, and certainly by this time Russia's overall engagement in Afghanistan had visibly increased. Moreover, in recent years, reports suggested that Moscow's support for the Taliban went beyond diplomacy to arms provision and other assistance (<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/03/26/596933077/top-u-s-commander-in-afghanistan-accuses-russia-of-aiding-taliban>). Russian officials also have subsequently justified engagement with the Taliban by pointing to ISIS as a common enemy ([https://url.emailprotection.link/?a-pzVkuipbQ3vb2jhdBqh4TFD4SbGRwrKlwDhPuYgSE93bWqCZi2IjS1GP\\_u6RbFXhs1zeFcXM4aztxTf5jdJpgIF25oAUn-LpSjBEMcqMJ6B8FCW2m2CQMe0LgOHLWaiNAoi-yxueqPFRa6ay3FVhudVoCYXRir3jeKyzhczgFOMutQrcyGeYxXJkdPTfYm\\_PV\\_fq0b7zRJwfU53ohAqA~~~](https://url.emailprotection.link/?a-pzVkuipbQ3vb2jhdBqh4TFD4SbGRwrKlwDhPuYgSE93bWqCZi2IjS1GP_u6RbFXhs1zeFcXM4aztxTf5jdJpgIF25oAUn-LpSjBEMcqMJ6B8FCW2m2CQMe0LgOHLWaiNAoi-yxueqPFRa6ay3FVhudVoCYXRir3jeKyzhczgFOMutQrcyGeYxXJkdPTfYm_PV_fq0b7zRJwfU53ohAqA~~~))), although in 2007 ISIS did not exist (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>). Regardless, even if contacts did begin in 2014, the Taliban's purported perception of ISIS as its chief enemy is rather tenuous (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-11-23/russias-questionable-counterterrorism-record>). Russia's presidential envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov most recently explained that early contact more circumspectly than in the past, claiming it arose from the need to convey "concerns about regional security" (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>). Russian foreign affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova justified the current ongoing dialogue with the Taliban (still officially labeled a terrorist organization in Russia) with the UN March 2020 resolution (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14139.doc.htm>), which Zakharova said "prioritizes inter-Afghan dialogue" (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>)."

## Towards Recognition?

In reality, Moscow's reliance on international law tends to be rather selective and self-serving. That Russia (like China) abstained (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1098802>) from the most recent UN resolution that called on the Taliban to live up to its commitments is one recent example of this behavior. Rather, Moscow appears to have concluded that the Taliban are the current reality in Afghanistan. Putin said as much (<https://iz.ru/1210278/2021-08-20/putin-zaiavil-o-neobkhodimosti-priniat-fakt-zakhvata-talibami-afganistana>) on August 20 after meeting with Germany's Angela Merkel, but this comment was more than a mere reaction to recent events. The Kremlin seems to have seen the writing on the wall several years ago with plans for American withdrawal and has been preparing. This is evident not only in Russia's bolstered security position in Central Asia, but also in quiet work to improve ties with the Taliban in recent years. It has also engaged with other actors on the ground. Since 2018, Moscow has hosted ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-a-first-moscow-prepares-to-host-afghan-talks-between-taliban-and-kabul-envoys/2018/11/08/1adffc42-e2a4-11e8-b759-3d88a5ce9e19\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-a-first-moscow-prepares-to-host-afghan-talks-between-taliban-and-kabul-envoys/2018/11/08/1adffc42-e2a4-11e8-b759-3d88a5ce9e19_story.html)) Taliban officials for several rounds of peace talks, which produced little tangible progress but gave Moscow an opportunity to come out as a convener of a major diplomatic initiative that largely excluded the U.S. Russian officials also routinely met with the Taliban in Qatar over the years, while Moscow expressed greater support than Western countries for President Trump's bad deal with the Taliban in 2020. Indeed, Moscow now touts its diplomatic standing in Afghanistan.

Kabulov [said \(https://ria.ru/20210714/diplomatiya-1741176641.html\)](https://ria.ru/20210714/diplomatiya-1741176641.html) last month that thanks to Russia's multi-year dialogue with the Taliban, Moscow can now "talk with any of the forces in Afghanistan," unlike the "failed Westerners."

Since Moscow is keeping its embassy open in Kabul, Russian officials will likely have more opportunities to interact with the Taliban. Moreover, recognition of the Taliban may be forthcoming in the near future, and not only from Moscow. The Uzbek government expressed readiness to "cooperate" with Afghanistan's new government agencies, and Beijing similarly said the establishment of the new Taliban government is a "[necessary step \(https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/09/08/China-foreign-ministry-says-ready-to-maintain-communication-with-new-Afghan-govt\)](https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/09/08/China-foreign-ministry-says-ready-to-maintain-communication-with-new-Afghan-govt)" in reconstruction. The Pakistan government meanwhile suggested the Taliban-run Afghan government should attend a regional forum. Against this backdrop, Angela Merkel's [comment \(https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-wants-talk-with-taliban-about-further-evacuations-afghanistan-merkel-2021-09-05/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-wants-talk-with-taliban-about-further-evacuations-afghanistan-merkel-2021-09-05/), "We need to talk to the Taliban about how we can continue to get people who worked for Germany out of the country and to safety," both points to loss of leverage and foreshadows what other Western governments may eventually face.

## Uncertain Future

Nothing Putin has done in the past would suggest he truly cares about the humanitarian catastrophe that will soon unfold in Afghanistan. It does suggest that he may manage to keep the security situation somewhat contained outside of Russia's borders in the short term. Of course, this does not guarantee an absence of spillover effects into Central Asia or Russia itself. Nor will this approach necessarily prevent more Russian citizens from establishing stronger ties with foreign terrorist groups. In addition, if Moscow starts to further clamp down on Russia's own Muslims, this approach will breed resentment and radicalization, as happened before. The situation may only become exacerbated as Russia's already sizable minority [continues to grow \(https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/03/05/russia-will-be-one-third-muslim-in-15-years-chief-mufti-predicts-a64706\)](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/03/05/russia-will-be-one-third-muslim-in-15-years-chief-mufti-predicts-a64706) and may especially present a problem as more [Muslims join the Russian army \(https://www.meforum.org/4702/muslim-russia\)](https://www.meforum.org/4702/muslim-russia). Indeed, the reality that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan poses risks to Russia is clearly [not lost on Putin \(https://tass.ru/politika/9810879\)](https://tass.ru/politika/9810879). Yet he also appears both somewhat prepared and intent on prioritizing anti-Americanism and working with the Taliban.

The fact of the matter is, the consequences of the U.S. withdrawal will continue to reverberate far beyond Afghanistan and Central Asia, and will most likely reach the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Only time will show its full long-term effect, but it will likely be bloody, as American adversaries and allies will conclude from the U.S. withdrawal that the benefits of revisionism to the Western rules-based order [\(which Moscow resents so much \(https://tass.com/world/1040237\)\)](https://tass.com/world/1040237), as well as terrorism, outweigh the costs.

Thus, for Moscow, this situation creates both problems and opportunities. As early as August 30, Zamir Kabulov [called \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/30/russia-afghanistan-taliban-aid/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/30/russia-afghanistan-taliban-aid/) for the unfreezing of \$9.5 billion in former Afghan government reserves and for them to go to the Taliban, while calling on the U.S. to take the bulk of the responsibility for stabilizing Afghanistan to "correct" its failures in the last twenty years. This approach suggests that as the security situation worsens, Moscow will likely push to shift the responsibility to the United States and the West more broadly. What is more, in time, the Kremlin may even get its wish. Barack Obama discovered in 2014 that he had to return American troops to the Middle East as ISIS rose across Syria and Iraq following an earlier U.S. withdrawal. The U.S. may yet find itself having to return to Afghanistan or the broader region. But not before things get worse.

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