

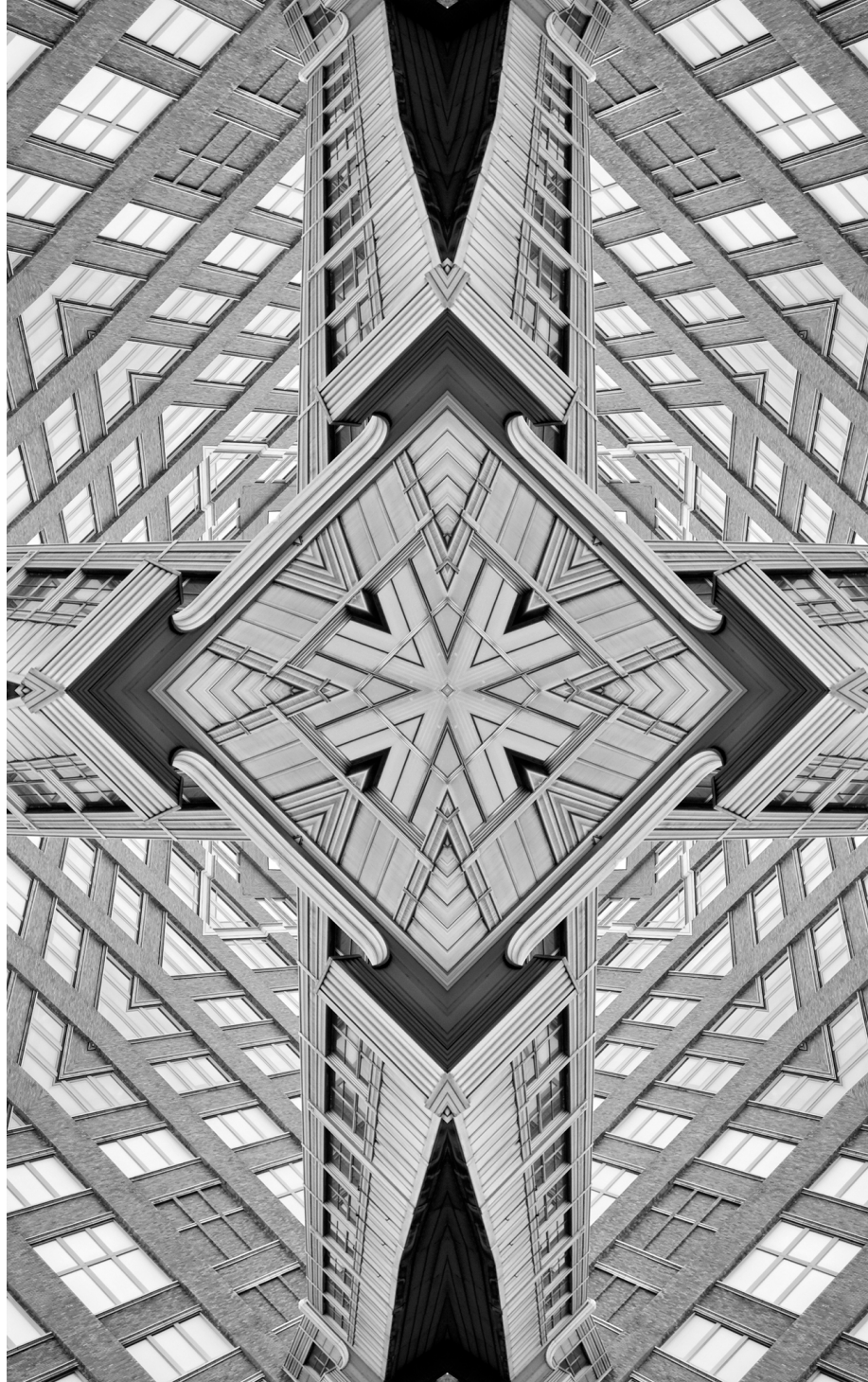
# Issue

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# Brief

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# Treading a Pragmatic Path: Russia in Afghanistan After August 2021

**Shivam Shekhawat**

## **Abstract**

After the United States and its allies left Afghanistan in 2021, analysts expected Russia to fill the vacuum caused by the withdrawal. As far as Moscow itself is concerned, it would like to establish full diplomatic ties with the Taliban, while it urges Western countries to take accountability and fulfil their responsibilities towards the Afghan people. Indeed, Russia's desire for security and regional hegemony compels it to selectively engage with the Taliban while hedging its bets in case of adverse developments. It is also conducting discussions with India on the threats related to terrorism and drug trafficking. Their long-term cooperation may be affected, however, by divergences in their engagement with the Taliban; the pressure of the Ukraine conflict on Moscow; and New Delhi's relationship with Washington.

# Russia's View of US Withdrawal

Moscow never viewed the two decades of United States (US) military presence in Afghanistan to be ideal. It had criticised what it perceived as US attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries in the name of democracy, reiterating the counterproductivity of imposing “unnatural forms of governance and public life” on others.<sup>1</sup>

As the Afghan Republic collapsed, the Russian news agency, RIA, alleged that then President Ashraf Ghani had fled the country in a helicopter full of cash.<sup>2</sup> According to the spokesperson for the Russian embassy, this image reflected the ‘disintegration’ of the republic and fed into Moscow’s aversion of the then Afghan government.<sup>3</sup> While these claims were refuted a year later, Moscow did welcome the Taliban’s gains in certain northern areas, with the Special Representative for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, regarding the group’s advance as beneficial for the security of the Central Asian Republics (CARs).

The US’s military presence allowed Moscow a security blanket while it expanded its influence in other areas.<sup>4</sup> In the initial decades of US presence in Afghanistan, Moscow supported the US’s counterterrorism initiatives. Putin viewed the War on Terror as the inevitable consequence of an increase in terror in the region;<sup>5</sup> Russia contributed to the counternarcotics and counterterrorism efforts, shared intelligence and information, provided military aid to the Afghan special forces engaged in these efforts, and joined the Northern Distribution Network to facilitate the transport of equipment and supplies through its territory between 2008 and 2015.<sup>6</sup> Senior Russian officials also expressed hope that Western forces would not withdraw before the country stabilises, at least to an extent.<sup>7</sup>

Russia was also apprehensive of the Obama administration’s decision to drawdown Western troops in the country in 2014. The barrier provided by the US curtailed the space available for the terrorist groups to act, easing pressures on the border. It also precluded Russia from taking a decision over a military involvement in the country.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, it rejoiced at the closure of the US Manas Transit system in Kyrgyzstan in 2015<sup>9</sup>—which was Washington’s gateway to Afghanistan—and on the other, the foreign minister of Russia urged the international community and NATO to not abandon Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup>

Today, Russia continues to engage with the Taliban as it advocates for Western states to take accountability for the humanitarian crisis and stabilise the country.<sup>11</sup>

# Moscow's Interests in Afghanistan

Russia's policy in Afghanistan can be attributed to the latter's geostrategic location. It is concerned about the security implications of Afghanistan's internal affairs, seeing them from "the prism of the whole region".<sup>12</sup> Moscow considers itself the guarantor of security and stability for the CARs. It also views these countries as falling under its sphere of influence while acting as a forward line of defence and an important aspect of its regional power.<sup>13</sup>

The resurgence of the Taliban in its neighbourhood reignites Moscow's fears of the threat of extremism and terrorism posed by radical groups and their infiltration in the CARs as well as Russia itself. These fears are a consequence of the Taliban's history of collaborating with Chechen militants and the susceptibility of youth from the CARs to extremist propaganda, with memories of Afghanistan being used as a safe haven by rebels still fresh.<sup>14</sup> After the fall of the Najibullah government and the beginning of the civil war in Tajikistan, the security in the region deteriorated, with the mid-1990s witnessing rapid incursion by *mujahideen* fighters and local radicals.

In February 2003, Russia delegated the Taliban as a terrorist organisation due to its relationship with Chechen and Al-Qaeda leaders, the capture of a civilian Russian heavy lifter in 1995, and the Taliban's attempt to destabilise the former Soviet Republic.<sup>15</sup> The porous borders between the CARs and Russia also raised fears about increased drug trafficking and infiltration by terrorists,<sup>a</sup> leading Moscow to cooperate with the US to combat these activities.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, the foreign policy of all countries involved in or affected by the developments in Afghanistan have been significantly affected by the emergence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)—a regional offshoot of ISIS. In 2015, they had a presence in 25 of the 34 Afghan provinces. While Russia initially viewed the spread of ISIS as advantageous in distracting the US from Ukraine, Moscow's concerns became more pronounced as the regional offshoot gained power.<sup>17</sup> Since the return of the Taliban, the CARs—in particular, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—have come under attack from militant groups within Afghanistan such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Tajik Taliban.<sup>18</sup> The ISKP has also threatened to topple governments that defy them and to target railway projects that connect the CARs. In April 2023, Tajikistan's security forces shot

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a The country has one of the highest rates of per-capita narcotics use, the majority of which flows from Afghanistan.

# Moscow's Interests in Afghanistan

two suspected militants affiliated with the Tajik Taliban, who had infiltrated the country's borders from Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup>

Concerns around the ISKP—which has been viewed as a ‘strategic threat’<sup>20</sup> to Russia's interests—as well as other militant outfits spilling into the CARs has been central to Russia's strategy of building its relationship with the Taliban. These engagements have been centred on gaining intelligence and information and hedging its bets in the event that the latter emerges as the dominant power in Afghanistan. Thus, Russia is driven by two underlying motivations—the immediate threat of the ISKP and the possibility of the Taliban expanding its foothold in the country.

For the Taliban, Russia's cooperation is a means to political legitimacy and gaining an upper hand over the ISKP. There have been reports about the Taliban responding to Russian intelligence by deploying a 1,000-member special force with equipment against the ISKP.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Moscow's interest in curtailing the rise of the ISKP converged with that of the US. The addition of the ISKP to the UN Sanctions Committee was also viewed as indicative of Russia's “effective cooperation” with the US.<sup>22</sup>

# Moscow's Response to the Taliban's Return

From the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 to the early 2010s, Russia's policy in the country was largely governed by the US's presence.<sup>23</sup> Fast-forward to 2021, and the breakdown of intra-Afghan talks and the resurgence of the Taliban in Kabul did not come as a surprise for Moscow. In July that year, a Taliban delegation visited Russia to grant platitudes to its leaders, assuring the protection of its diplomatic mission and the safety of the country's northern border with the CARs.<sup>24</sup> As reports of the Taliban gaining control of the northern areas emerged, the Russian envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, outlined the security advantages of this development for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>25</sup> According to Russia, the Taliban were trying to combat extremist groups in the north which are more focused on the CARs.<sup>26</sup> Two months later, the Russian embassy—one of the few that remained open under the new Emirate—became the target of a terrorist attack by the ISKP, highlighting concerns about the security threat that ISKP would pose under Taliban rule. Moscow's initial enthusiasm and cautious optimism eventually gave way to fear of the impact of terrorism on Moscow's security.

In the initial weeks of the Taliban takeover, the new status quo was favourably viewed by Moscow; the Russian envoy considered the change to be a positive development, while the Ambassador of Russia to Afghanistan announced that the Taliban was guarding their embassy.<sup>27</sup> However, almost simultaneously, the Russian president reiterated support to Tajikistan in case of a cross-border attack. As the security in Afghanistan gradually began unravelling, Russia started to act, eventually sending four military aircrafts to evacuate 500 people from the country.<sup>28</sup>

In September 2021, the Islamic Emirate released a list of their all-male, Pashtun-dominated Cabinet. While Russia was one of the five countries invited to the inauguration,<sup>29</sup> its expectations that its allies will be incorporated in a future coalition government came to a naught. The talks between former Afghan president Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah continued for a brief period before coming to a standstill. The Taliban adopted a *quid pro quo* approach towards cooperation with regional countries—i.e., the group would accommodate the concerns and expectations of the other countries if they recognised the Taliban.<sup>30</sup> Moscow was thus compelled to diversify its approach.

# Moscow's Response to the Taliban's Return

In a bid to project its power and hedge its bets against the Taliban not doing Moscow's bidding, the latter conducted exercises with the CARs beginning in August 2021.<sup>31</sup> These 'overt deterrents' were aimed at increasing interoperability between Russia and its partners in the region and testing Moscow's ability to deploy some elements to Afghanistan. The Ministry of Defence devised three responses: strengthening Russia's military power, providing aid to its partners in Central Asia, and conducting more exercises.<sup>32</sup> The 201<sup>st</sup> base in Tajikistan received new, light firearms and other upgrade facilities. Moscow also increased its aid to Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan in 2021 and held exercises with both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Joint military exercises were also conducted with China near the latter's western Xinxiang region.<sup>33</sup> These exercises become more relevant with Moscow's dwindling confidence in the Taliban's ability to contain the ISKP, as indicated by the infiltration of Tajik militants and the relocation of over 70,000 Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan militants in northern Afghanistan's provinces in the last few months.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from the terror threat, Moscow had to confront other negative externalities of the withdrawal. As per Russian intelligence, by October 2021, around seven million Afghan refugees had fled Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> Russia has been concerned about the flow of refugees both directly into Russia and through the CARs because of the threat of terrorists infiltrating the country as militants.<sup>36</sup> The proliferation of conventional weapons and the potential to smuggle the arms and ammunitions left behind by the departing forces were also cause for concern.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, while the Taliban has been fairly successful in clamping down on opium production, it has resulted in a simultaneous increase in the smuggling of synthetic drugs, with the number of drug seizures increasing in the CARs.<sup>38</sup> According to a report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Afghanistan is the fastest growing maker of methamphetamine, with a production volume that has the potential to overhaul the synthetic drug market.<sup>39</sup> There were associated fears that the war in Ukraine would trigger an expansion of the manufacture and trafficking of synthetic drugs.<sup>40</sup>

# Regional Consultations on Afghanistan

Since 2021, there have been three rounds of the Moscow Format Consultations. The Taliban participated in the first, which took place in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Kabul. In July 2023, the Acting Foreign Minister of the Emirate, Amir Khan Muttaqi, met Russian Ambassador Dmitry Zhirnov in Kabul. A Taliban spokesperson then confirmed the group's participation in the next round of consultations.<sup>41</sup> Meant to discuss ways through which the regional countries can find a solution to the crisis in Afghanistan, the Moscow Format talks were held in Kazan on September 29. The meeting included discussions on the inclusivity of the interim Taliban government, counterterrorism, drug-related crimes, and Afghanistan's reintegration into the regional economy.

While the Taliban attended as an observer, along with representatives from the UAE, Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, no invitation was extended to the US. The Russian Special representative also deemed the extended troika with the US as defunct,<sup>42</sup> reflecting the growing differences between the West and Russia following the eruption of the Ukraine war. It also showed Moscow's attempt to leverage the consultations as a means of forming an anti-West front, with the Kazan Declaration urging for the lifting of the freeze on Afghanistan's assets and underlining opposition to any US or NATO military presence in the region. The statement also ruled out cooperation with any 'non-regional player' unless the West took responsibility for their actions.<sup>43</sup>

However, while this year's meeting gave Russia the chance to demonstrate that it was no longer isolated, the differences between the countries vis-à-vis Afghanistan persist. Owing to Tajikistan's heightened concerns about terrorism, it did not agree with the support that the other countries were giving to the group's fight against the ISKP and the war on illicit drugs. The Kazan Declaration was released without Tajikistan's signature, and Moscow acknowledged Dushanbe's "rational position".<sup>44</sup>

Russia has used the Moscow Format and other such regional consultations on Afghanistan to maintain its influence in the region. In 2010, as the regional dynamics of Afghanistan transformed, Russia adopted alternate ways of marking its influence in the region to protect itself against any negative impact.<sup>45</sup> Its military presence in the CARs historically has not addressed its concerns about drug trafficking and the cross-border infiltration from Afghanistan. Thus, spearheading such consultations increased Russia's stakes in the crisis and helped it carve out a diplomatic space for itself as an important facilitator. The



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emergence of the ISKP as well as the drawdown of Western presence increased the role of regional countries such as India, Iran, China, and Pakistan, and platforms like the Moscow Format allowed Russia to have conversations at the Eurasian level.

When the first Moscow Format Consultations were announced, they were welcomed by the Taliban, who were poised to welcome an anti-US alliance in the region.<sup>46</sup> However, the then republic was uncomfortable at the prospect of not being included in the talks.

Both the Taliban and the members of the Afghanistan High Peace Council participated in the 2018 round of the consultation, which paved the way for an intra-Afghan dialogue in 2019 that saw participation from members of the Northern Alliance, other mujahideen groups, as well as the Taliban. Analysts considered these consultations both as a competition to and complementary with US-led efforts to attain peace in Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup> Sometime later, in 2021, the Russian Foreign Minister expressed his support for the Doha peace process in Qatar.

# Moscow's Cooperation with the Taliban

Moscow has historically had reservations about the government in Kabul, which contributed to its decision to balance its relationship with the Taliban and include the latter in regional consultations—even at the expense of the power centre in Kabul. Almost six months before the Taliban gained power in Afghanistan, a Taliban delegation visited Moscow. Following the visit, Kabulov defended the Taliban's actions in Afghanistan, arguing that the group was respecting their end of the bargain and that it was the Afghan government that was sabotaging the talks in Doha.<sup>48</sup>

This is but one manifestation of Moscow's intent to maintain a relationship with the Taliban.<sup>49</sup> Moscow has been developing its relations with Pashtun ethnic groups since at least 2000. Some analysts claim that their relations go as far back as the 1990s, when Russian diplomats met Mullah Omar, and that these informal ties were Moscow's means of expanding its influence in internal and international competition within Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup>

In April 2022, the Russian foreign ministry appointed the Taliban diplomat Jamal Nasir Gharwal as the Afghan Charge d'Affaires in Moscow. This may have been facilitated by the Taliban's non-interference in Kazakhstan in January 2022 and the escalation of tensions between Russia and the US. However, the spokesperson for the foreign ministry regarded this as a step towards the "resumption of diplomatic contacts" but not towards the eventual recognition of the group.<sup>51</sup> According to Kabulov, the Moscow Format talks are a suitable outlet for "promoting national reconciliation in Kabul."<sup>52</sup> In 2021, while the talks called for inclusivity, Russia's president claimed that they may consider removing the Taliban from their 'banned organisations' list if the situation develops positively.<sup>53</sup> In an interview, Kabulov said the Taliban has now transformed into a national movement and Moscow no longer sees them as 'terrorists per se'.<sup>54</sup> While, in principle, Moscow cannot rule out the possibility of the group earning recognition in the near future, it hinges on the formation of an inclusive government. He also reiterated how an 'ethnopolitical inclusive' government will be an Afghanistan-led initiative, requiring the Taliban to interact with the communities to include more ethnic groups in the government.<sup>55</sup>

In September 2022, Russia was the first to sign an economic deal with the Taliban for the supply of oil, wheat and gas to Afghanistan. The deal will

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facilitate the provision of one million tonnes of gas, 500,000 tonnes of LPG, and two million tonnes of wheat annually at discounted rates in Russian Rubles.<sup>56</sup> To be sure, however, Russia still trails behind Iran, China and Pakistan in terms of exports to Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup> Talks about the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline and the Trans-Afghan Railway have also seen slow progress because of the security situation.

Two years since the Taliban's return, Moscow has been circumspect about following through with the planned large-scale projects. On the question of lithium and other mineral deposits as well, there has been a reticence to invest in the short term.<sup>58</sup>

# Avenues for India- Russia Cooperation

Russia's interests in Afghanistan align with those of many other countries in its neighbourhood. Russia's relations with Pakistan are slowly developing, while its cooperation with China is also growing. Beyond these new partnerships, Moscow has for long had a convergence of interests with both Tehran and New Delhi, with whom it worked in the 1990s in supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. In November 2001, following talks between then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Vladimir Putin, they rejected any role of the Taliban in the new Afghan government.<sup>59</sup>

In June 2020, Kabulov urged New Delhi to rethink its policy of not engaging with the Taliban, making a case for a reformed Taliban and highlighting how the group initiated communication with New Delhi and refrained from exploiting the situation in Kashmir.<sup>60</sup> However, Moscow snubbed New Delhi by not inviting it to the Extended Troika; according to Kabulov, India's interests in Afghanistan are only relevant in the "post conflict development phase", as the country has no influence over the Taliban.<sup>61</sup> This discord in the regional approaches of New Delhi and Moscow vis-à-vis Afghanistan has resulted in India's absence from certain regional consultations headed by Russia.

Two years later, the crisis in Ukraine and Russia's acceptance of a limited role for the US in the region and the irrelevance of the extended troika format has made India's role more important. While India was present at this year's Moscow Format consultations, it was not part of the meeting of the foreign ministers of Afghanistan's neighbours, which include Pakistan and China.

On 24 August 2021, Putin held talks with the Indian Prime Minister, which led to the creation of a permanent bilateral channel for consultations. On 8 September 2021, India's National Security Adviser met his Russian counterpart and agreed to expand cooperation against terrorism and illicit drugs. Intelligence cooperation between the two in Central Asia was also discussed, with both countries committing to stop the radicalisation of the countries in the aftermath of the Taliban's return. The Russian side has also been cognisant of the potential of the instability in Afghanistan spilling into Kashmir.<sup>62</sup>

Security officials from both sides met on the sidelines of a meeting of representatives from the BRICS countries in July and discussed Russia-India cooperation in security and economy.<sup>63</sup> Earlier, in February 2023, the Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval met his Russian counterpart and the Russian

# Avenues for India- Russia Cooperation

president. The two sides discussed their strategic partnership, with the Indian NSA stressing on the need to intensify intelligence and security cooperation to deal with the terrorists under UNSC Resolution 1267.<sup>b</sup> In the same meeting, Putin highlighted the dangers of “extra-regional powers” expanding their influence in Afghanistan and attempting to build infrastructure,<sup>64</sup> indicating the United States and its attempts to regain influence in the region. Both sides have also expressed the need to utilise the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation-Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure for counterterrorism cooperation.

Russia’s efforts to create strategic space for itself will be futile without India. The two sides have multiple frameworks over which to cooperate, from the bilateral counterterrorism working group and the track of the National Security Council to the 2+2 Defence and the foreign ministers’ format. This is not to say that Russia and India do not have their fair share of differences.

During the 23<sup>rd</sup> summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, hosted by New Delhi virtually in early July this year, all sides called for an inclusive government in Afghanistan. While these calls for inclusivity have resonated across the international community, there is a lack of understanding and consensus on what countries mean by ‘inclusivity’ and how important it is for them.<sup>65</sup> Owing to India’s commitment to democracy and its related institutions, it is important to ensure that the Taliban translates its rhetoric to action and provides rights to all groups, especially ethnic minorities and women.

On the other hand, Moscow is not deeply concerned about the situation within Afghanistan unless it has a direct bearing on its security. In 2022, at the 51st session of the UN Human Rights Council, Russia refrained from joining the chorus on criticising the Taliban for their actions against the rights of women, instead highlighting the efforts of the “new Afghan government” to ensure the rights of women in marriage and property inheritance.<sup>66</sup> It also justified the closure of schools because of the lack of financial resources on the part of the Taliban, ultimately linking it to the West’s twin failures to lift the sanctions and release the country’s foreign reserves. It called on the Western countries to fulfil their obligations instead of directing new demands towards the group.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>b</sup> Passed by the UNSC in 1999, the resolution imposed targeted sanctions on the Taliban for its support to other terror organisations, particularly Al-Qaeda, and letting them use Afghanistan to launch international terror operations. Pursuant to this and other UNSC resolutions, the UNSC 1267 Sanctions Committee is now responsible for listing and delisting of terror organisations.

# Avenues for India- Russia Cooperation

The growing relationship between Pakistan and Russia, with the two sides aiming to increase cooperation in counterterrorism, also has the potential to strain India-Russia cooperation. Some analysts see the growing engagement as Russia's way of putting pressure on India; this may not necessarily be the case. Moscow understands New Delhi's reluctance to cross certain lines in Afghanistan, and developing ties with other countries can help Russia develop an alternative partner to manage the situation in Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup> The growing India-US partnership can also put a strain in the relationship.

The interests of Moscow and New Delhi converge on certain subjects—counterterrorism, drug trafficking, instability in the CARs, and the proliferation of conventional weapons. It is also imperative that India works with its partners in the region to influence the security in Afghanistan. Even before the US withdrawal, there were expectations of a realignment of both New Delhi's and Moscow's positions. With India expanding its engagement with the Taliban, its cooperation with Russia may advance.

The Taliban's return in Afghanistan created the preconditions for power shifts across Central Asia and beyond, posing both opportunities and challenges for all powers involved in the region. For Russia, even as the withdrawal of the US and its allies allowed Moscow to expand its influence, it was accompanied by latent anxieties around the dangers of a missing US security blanket in the region.

Russia has adopted a dual approach to these consequences—while, on the one hand, it continues to selectively engage with the group, building a “patronage network”,<sup>69</sup> it is also working to improve its containment strategies in case its courting of the Taliban backfires.<sup>70</sup> This duality accords Russia space to manoeuvre its foreign policy. Moving forward, Russia will aim to secure its interests with its partner countries in the region.

While there are opportunities for both India and Russia to work together, especially on terrorism and drug-related issues, their divergences remain stark. Moreover, the differences between Russia and the US, as well as Moscow's desire to reduce Washington's influence could also have negative consequences for New Delhi-Moscow cooperation in the region. China's growing inroads in Afghanistan and the close relationship between Russia and China can affect long-term cooperation between New Delhi and Moscow. While India has been wary of supporting the anti-West rhetoric of the regional dialogues on Afghanistan, it will continue to participate to maintain its influence. ORF

**Shivam Shekhawat** is a Junior Fellow with ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,  
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA

Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005

E-mail: [contactus@orfonline.org](mailto:contactus@orfonline.org)

Website: [www.orfonline.org](http://www.orfonline.org)