



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Security Review

Giorgi Bilanishvili

Afghanistan – Opportunities and Challenges for the Russian Federation

2021

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher. The opinions and conclusions expressed are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

Copyright © 2021 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

Lately, the discussions about a possible weakening of US influence in international politics has become more frequent. Parallel to this, there is talk about the activation of Russia and, especially, China in this regard with their influence growing on the international stage. The increasing confrontation between these two countries and the United States has also become one of the most pressing matters. Given all of this, it is now stated more frequently that the world order is changing and a new multi-polar international system is being formed which will be followed by the redistribution of the spheres of influence in the world, leading to increased roles played by China and Russia. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan is considered to be a development of such importance that it could influence the aforementioned international processes and, therefore, commands special attention in that regard as well.

Apart from this, the political and security situation in Afghanistan concerns a multitude of states which includes the great powers of the region such as India, China, Russia, Iran and Turkey that play important roles regionally or globally. The interests of these countries, including with regard to Afghanistan, converge in certain cases while diverging in others.

At the moment, it is largely unclear how the relations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan created by the Taliban may develop with its neighbors. Experts assess the prospects of Afghan-Indian and Afghan-Iranian relations especially unfavorably. The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan's leadership is also important in terms of international security. In this regard, the main cause of concern is the threat of the activation of international terrorism.

All of the things mentioned above comprise an incomplete list of the important aspects of the current situation in Afghanistan which, as a whole, create a complex and multi-dimensional picture. For Russia, therefore, Afghanistan also does not have a single dimension. It is, on the one hand, a certain opportunity for the Russian Federation in order for it to bolster influence on the international arena. At the same time, however, the threats that have increased in Afghanistan given the new realities naturally cannot stay outside of Moscow's attention.

Topic of Afghanistan for Russia's International Political Agenda

The Russian Federation, which considers the United States to be its main rival on the international stage, constantly searches for additional arguments to discredit Washington in front of the international community. In this regard, similarities between Afghanistan and Iraq are considerable. The 2003 US military operation in Iraq and the following military mission in the country did not bring tangible results for Iraq's stability and development or regional stability at large. This is exactly why Iraq became one of the primary arguments for Moscow in order to discredit the United States.

Moscow was using the topic of Afghanistan for discrediting the US long before its withdrawal from the country. However, Moscow's arguments now have become even stronger due to various factors. Even before the exit of the US forces, the Taliban managed to establish control over almost the entire country and entered Kabul. The Government of Afghanistan and its state institutions crumbled practically without putting up any fight. This confirmed that the West's long and considerable efforts at building functional state institutions in Afghanistan, including the security services and defense forces, turned out to be practically fruitless. The US prestige was also damaged by the hastened process of the evacuation from Afghanistan which was accompanied by various difficulties and

unfortunate incidents. All of this worsened the impression about the collapse of the entire operation in Afghanistan, damaging the image of the Biden administration.

Hence, Afghanistan has turned into an even more solid argument for Moscow's foreign policy. Among others, it has become a more "sizable chunk" for Russian propaganda which is an indispensable part of Moscow's foreign policy. Given this situation, it is no longer surprising that the activation of Russian manipulation with the topic of Afghanistan [has been observed](#) in various countries of the world with pro-Russian trolls playing a notable role.

Apart from this, it is important for Moscow to show that it can act positively in terms of regulating challenges and neutralizing threats that arise due to the situation in Afghanistan. This has special significance for Moscow's political interests after the failure of the US mission in Afghanistan.

A certain foothold for this already exists. Moscow was an active participant in the recent negotiations about Afghanistan together with the US, China and other states. After its withdrawal from Afghanistan, Moscow probably considers that the overall US positions in Afghanistan will likely be weakened. Therefore, from Moscow's standpoint, there is fertile ground for further strengthening the role of Russia and other big states of the region in resolving the problems around Afghanistan.

Such a development is beneficial for Moscow since this fits right in with its foreign policy concept which, on the one hand, envisages the reduction of US influence on the international arena and bolsters the influence of regional actors, on the other.

Russia's Relations with the Taliban

The Taliban has been recognized as a terrorist organization by Russia since 2003 and, therefore, its operations are illegal on the territory of the Russian Federation. Despite this, Moscow has rather close relations with this organization which it [started](#) to establish back in 2007. In 2011, the position of the Russian President's Special Representative for Afghanistan Issues was created, [entrusted](#) to an experienced diplomat, Zamir Kabulov.

Russia's connections with the Taliban can arbitrarily be divided into two parts. The first part consists of the official contact with the political office of the Taliban which is located in the capital of Qatar, Doha. In terms of these relations, [several visits](#) of the Taliban's political office delegation to Moscow have been held since 2018.

The most recent [visit](#) took place at the end of July 2021. In terms of this visit, the Taliban's delegation [held meetings](#) with representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. It was also the very first occasion that they were able to hold a [press conference](#). With such actions, Moscow deliberately facilitated the legitimization of the Taliban, trying to deepen relations with it even further.

Of course, Moscow's connections with the Taliban were not limited to the official relations discussed above. It seems that the connections with the part of the Taliban that operated on the territory of Afghanistan directly and conducted military operations against the United States and its allies had been established for a long time. This was first [discussed](#) in March 2018 by US Army General, John Nicholson, who openly accused Russia of attempts to destabilize the situation in Afghanistan.

Information of a similar sort was disseminated in June 2020 as well according to which US intelligence reported about Russian military intelligence being in contact with Taliban-affiliated groups which were being offered solid payments in return for destroying the coalition forces.

Russian officials do not deny having various types of communication channels with the Taliban. According to the [statement](#) by the Russian President's Special Representative for Afghanistan Issues, Zamir Kabulov, Moscow started establishing relations with the Taliban seven years ago.

Thanks to the aforementioned contacts, at the moment Russia feels rather confident which was manifested in the fact that Russia, together with China, is among a small number of states that [did not evacuate](#) their embassies from Kabul as they had received strong security guarantees from the Taliban itself.

Despite close connections with the Taliban, a certain part of Russian experts believes that Moscow will not be quick to recognize this organization. According to the [statement](#) of the Press Speaker of the President of Russia, Dmitry Peskov, Moscow will wait for the first steps taken by the Taliban government and make its decision afterwards. Apart from this, it is, of course, also important how the events develop in Afghanistan and what the other influential international actors decide. Hence, despite its ties with the Taliban, Moscow does not want to make a hasty decision and damage its image.

Security Challenges

Russia also has security challenges with regard to Afghanistan, of course. This is primarily connected to the possible activation of terrorist threats. Namely, Moscow fears that due to the situation in Afghanistan, it could become a safe haven for various international terrorist organizations. Among them, Moscow sees particular danger in the Islamic State.

During the most recent visit of the representatives of Taliban's political office, it seems that Moscow got additional [guarantees](#) that the Taliban will not allow the functioning of the Islamic State on the territory of Afghanistan. That said, the other question is whether or not the Taliban is capable of actually delivering on that promise.

This organization clearly lacks the resources and the experience to efficiently run the country and create functioning state institutions. Therefore, it is highly likely that the radical groups operating on the territory of Afghanistan, belonging to the Islamic State and/or other organizations, will continue their work and will hardly be subject to the Taliban's control. Apart from this, the Taliban itself is not a unified monolithic [organization](#). There are various groups within it whose parts have [rather radical positions](#). These groups have the serious potential of making their own decisions and acting independently.

Another security challenge for Russia is found in the various groups from Afghanistan penetrating the territories of Central Asian states. According to the assessment of a large part of Russian experts, such risks are the highest in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Both of these countries are a part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and, therefore, Russia has a special responsibility for their security.

Hence, parallel to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan in July-August 2021, the government of Russia started bolstering security measures in the direction of the Central Asian states. Among other things, the [combat readiness](#) of Russian military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan increased.

Russia's actions were not limited to this. Several military exercises were recently held in the region whose task was to destroy illegal armed groups. At the same time, special attention was paid to strengthening border control, especially on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan strip, which is relatively more [defenseless](#) than those of other Central Asian states. Also, the [coordination of intelligence services](#) is of special importance in order to avoid penetration by extremist groups and the activation of their work in the Central Asian republics.

Conclusion

The formation of the new reality in Afghanistan is so far at its initial stage and due to various factors, it is difficult to predict how the events will develop in the country and what the respective influence will be on the regional and international security environments. In general, it can be stated that the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan is potentially more of a harmful development for security than not.

Russia at this stage is quite confident as, on the one hand, it has close contacts with the Taliban and, on the other hand, the convergence of Chinese and Russian positions in this regard is very important as the role of China in the region at large, as well as specifically with regard to Afghanistan, is quite serious.

After the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, there is an expectation that China will attempt to further bolster its influence in the region. In order to do this, it will start implementing various economic projects in Afghanistan, including the incorporation of Afghanistan into the One Belt, One Road initiative.

Unlike China, Afghanistan is important to Russia in the regional context in terms of security. Despite its confidence, Moscow realizes the growth of security risks. Therefore, the government of Russia is trying to exercise a consistent policy in order to reduce these security risks by activating various regional cooperation formats that are currently in place.