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From Intervention to Recognition: Russia's Taliban Policy

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On Christmas Eve in 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, dramatically altering the global and regional balance of power. To counter the Soviets, America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), with the help of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), created the *mujahideen* to wage *jihad* against the Soviet Union. After nearly a decade of conflict, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, leaving prominent mujahideen groups to battle among themselves. This internecine fighting paved the way for the rise of the Taliban movement. Russia, as the successor to the Soviet Union, did not stay away from Afghanistan for long. It began supporting the Northern Alliance, a conglomeration of anti-Taliban groups, primarily to counter the Taliban's financial, diplomatic, and weapons support to Chechen fighters. Fast forward to today, on July 03, 2025, Russia became the first country to formally recognise the Taliban government in Afghanistan, sparking fresh debate over what this act symbolises and whether other countries would follow in its footsteps. ¹

Moscow's Gradual Rapprochement with the Taliban

Although the news of Moscow's decision may have arrived earlier than anticipated by the global community, it was hardly surprising. This had been in the making for a while. In December 2024, Russia's lower house of Parliament, the State Duma, approved a bill to delist the Taliban from the country's federal list of terrorist organisations, a status the group held since 2003. ² President Vladimir Putin then approved this bill. Subsequently, following a petition by Russia's Prosecutor General, the Supreme Court lifted the more than two-decade-long ban on the Taliban on April 17, 2025. ³ Ultimately, these developments culminated in Russia legitimising the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and accepting the credentials of a Taliban ambassador, with the '*Shahada*' flag being hoisted at Afghanistan's embassy in Moscow. ⁴

Even before officially delisting the Taliban and legitimising their rule, Russia was already engaging with them in multifarious ways. It was one of the few countries to keep its embassy in Kabul open during the Taliban takeover in August 2021. By September 2022, Russia had signed an economic deal with the Taliban (the first nation to do so), agreeing to supply oil, wheat and gas to Afghanistan. ⁵ Expectedly, there are hopes that Russia's latest move will boost bilateral trade volume with Afghanistan, which, according to the Taliban's Ministry of Industry and Commerce, amounted to USD 12.42 billion in 2024. ⁶ Besides, since their return to power, the Taliban have marked their attendance at several Russia-led forums, from the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan to the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), with the latest being the 16th Kazan Economic Forum in May 2025. ⁷ Consequently, Russia emerged as a key interlocutor for deliberations on Afghanistan, a role formerly held by the United States (US); the West's weariness with Afghanistan-related issues only allowed Moscow to increase its influence in the region.

It is worth noting that although Russia's purported aims include collaboration on infrastructure, energy pipelines and agriculture projects, and while these are no doubt true to some extent, its primary driver for recognition is to address the threat posed by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), which was implicated in the March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack. Russia seeks to prevent any spillover from Afghanistan's narcotics trafficking and the presence of various transnational terror groups therein into Central Asia, a region that has historically fallen within its natural sphere of influence. In this context, Russia's special envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, has expressed interest in arming the Taliban.⁸ Notably, rumours of Russia arming the Taliban had surfaced as early as 2017, evidenced by statements from General John Nicholson, then-commander of the US-led international forces.⁹ However, doubts persist regarding the Taliban's capability to effectively counter ISKP, raising questions about the utility of Russia's decision. This scepticism is not without merit. Nevertheless, Russia may be aiming to gain more stakes in the Taliban's counterterrorism efforts against the ISKP. Additionally, Russia's broader objective of regaining its lost global and regional influence—especially after the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and in light of Western sanctions imposed due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war—possibly played a role in the Kremlin's calculations while recognising the Taliban.

Will Others Follow Suit?

During their first stint in power (1996-2001), the Taliban were recognised by only three countries, namely the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Although no country other than Russia has taken the significant step of formally recognising the Taliban's second term, many maintain diplomatic relations with its regime. For instance, the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have removed the Taliban from their lists of proscribed terrorist organisations. Meanwhile, China, Uzbekistan, and the United Arab Emirates have officially accepted ambassadors appointed by the Taliban. Reportedly, the Taliban have sent their diplomats to numerous other countries and are believed to be overseeing Afghanistan's embassies abroad, although further clarity on this matter remains pending. Pakistan, whose intelligence agency had facilitated the Taliban's return to power but whose relations with the group have since soured due to its support for the *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP), only recently upgraded its *Chargé d'Affaires* in Kabul to the rank of Ambassador.¹⁰

India has deployed a technical team in its Kabul embassy, and in May 2025 (post Operation *Sindoor*), its Foreign Minister spoke with his Taliban counterpart, marking the first ministerial-level engagement between Afghanistan and India since August 2021.¹¹ On the other hand, the West, particularly the US, has made progress in women's rights and greater inclusivity within the Taliban's rank-and-file a prerequisite for some degree of high-level engagement and recognition, even as it continues to engage with the group to deliver humanitarian aid, which has notably witnessed a steep decline.¹² However, Russia's recent actions may prompt the West to recalibrate its strategy toward

Afghanistan, perhaps even find a delicate balance between pressuring the Taliban to improve human rights and engaging with them to alleviate the suffering of the Afghan people.

Although Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi is hoping that Russia's recognition will serve as an example for other countries, it remains to be seen whether regional states will follow suit. Beijing welcomed Moscow's decision, stating that it "has always believed that Afghanistan should not be excluded from the international community", while Pakistan cautiously described it as "a matter between two sovereign states."¹³ Given Pakistan's strained ties with the Taliban, Islamabad may dangle the carrot of recognition until the group takes concrete steps to rein in the TTP—a factor Beijing will likely weigh in its decision matrix. Still, recognition from regional players cannot be ruled out.

Broader Implications

Notwithstanding Russia's underlying rationale for taking this step, it unarguably signifies a breakdown of the international consensus that no state would recognise the Taliban without concessions on human and women's rights. Recognition remains one of the few levers *vis-à-vis* the Taliban, and this move risks setting a precedent for other countries to pursue self-serving foreign policies at the expense of Afghans. This is not to suggest states should avoid the Taliban. In fact, experts caution against isolating the Taliban, since this could vindicate their perception of the world being against them, potentially leading them to impose harsher restrictions on the Afghan populace. Instead, pragmatic engagement, especially with relatively moderate Taliban leaders, has been advocated as a means to gradually encourage the Taliban to adapt to contemporary governance norms. This becomes especially significant given the existing chasm between Taliban leaders in Kabul and Kandahar; the former are less in favour of the latter's hardline edicts on women's rights, leading some to suggest that this internal divide can, indeed, be strategically leveraged.

Remarkably, there are signs that today's Taliban differs from their mid-1990s iteration: they are less reclusive, have embraced the Internet, and are keener on international engagement, seeking to boost trade and diplomatic relations with several countries of their own volition. These factors, coupled with their rule being a hard reality, make it increasingly difficult for the world to ignore them, rendering some form of engagement vital. As states look toward deepening their engagement with the Taliban, it might be worthwhile to clearly outline the expectations and deliverables they seek from the group. Equally crucial here is conducting a dispassionate assessment of the Taliban's ability and willingness to fulfil these commitments.

Notes:

- ¹ Mark Trevelyan, "Russia becomes first country to recognise Taliban government of Afghanistan," *Reuters*, July 04, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/russia-becomes-first-country-recognise-taliban-government-afghanistan-2025-07-03/>. Accessed on July 05, 2025.
- ² Aleksei Zakharov, "Delisting the Taliban: What's Driving Moscow's New Afghanistan Policy?," Observer Research Foundation, April 28, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/delisting-the-taliban-what-s-driving-moscow-s-new-afghanistan-policy>. Accessed on July 05, 2025.
- ³ Ibid. Accessed on July 05, 2025.
- ⁴ Habib Mohammadi, "Taliban flag raised in Moscow as Russia grants formal recognition," *Amu TV*, July 03, 2025, <https://amu.tv/184365/>. Accessed on July 05, 2025.
- ⁵ Mohammad Yunus Yawar and Charlotte Greenfield, "Afghan Taliban sign deal for Russian oil products, gas and wheat," *Reuters*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/exclusive-afghan-taliban-sign-deal-russian-oil-products-gas-wheat-2022-09-27/>. Accessed on July 08, 2025.
- ⁶ Setara Qudosi, "Afghanistan's trade volume surpasses \$12 billion in 2024: Statement," *Amu TV*, January 05, 2025, <https://amu.tv/148780/>. Accessed on July 05, 2025.
- ⁷ "Mullah Baradar Leads Taliban Delegation to Kazan Economic Forum in Tatarstan," *Afghanistan International*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.afintl.com/en/202505143808>. Accessed on July 09, 2025.
- ⁸ Hayatullah Rahimi, "Kabulov: Russia Should Arm the Taliban Against ISIS," *TOLONews*, July 02, 2025, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-194855>. Accessed on July 06, 2025.
- ⁹ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Russia is sending weapons to Taliban, top U.S. general confirms," *The Washington Post*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/04/24/russia-is-sending-weapons-to-taliban-top-u-s-general-confirms/>. Accessed on July 05, 2025.
- ¹⁰ Tahir Khan, "Kabul also levels up to its Pakistan diplomat to ambassador as ties see 'normalisation'," *Dawn*, May 31, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1914506>. Accessed on July 08, 2025.
- ¹¹ Kallol Bhattacharjee, "In a first, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar talks to Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi," *The Hindu*, May 16, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/in-a-first-external-affairs-minister-jaishankar-talks-to-talibans-acting-foreign-minister-muttaqi/article69580713.ece>. Accessed on July 08, 2025.
- ¹² Graeme Smith, "Rethinking Talks with the Taliban," International Crisis Group, April 18, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/rethinking-talks-taliban>. Accessed on July 16, 2025.
- ¹³ Anwesha Ghosh, "Taliban Gains First Official Recognition as Russia Steps Forward," Indian Council of World Affairs, July 10, 2025, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=13229&lid=8064. Accessed on July 16, 2025.