

Russia's Strategic Engagement With the Afghan Taliban Post-2021: A Realist Appraisal of Geopolitical Interests, Security Calculus, and Regional Diplomacy

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Abstract

Russia's strategic engagement with the Afghan Taliban following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 exemplifies a calculated realist approach to post-hegemonic regional statecraft. This study argues that Moscow's policy towards Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, marked by conditional cooperation until July 2025 when it officially recognized the Taliban's government, was driven by defensive security imperatives, offensive power-balancing against Western and Chinese influence, and a neoclassical realist adaptation to systemic constraints. Through qualitative analysis of primary sources, multilateral forums (Moscow Format, SCO), and elite rhetoric, the paper demonstrates how Russia leverages the Taliban as a transactional partner to contain ISIS-K, stabilize Central Asia's security architecture, and assert diplomatic centrality, while avoiding the pitfalls of overcommitment. Key findings reveal a tripartite strategy: (1) security pragmatism (intelligence-sharing, border stabilization), (2) institutional hedging (CSTO deterrence alongside bilateral Taliban engagement), and (3) economic minimalism (targeted aid sans reconstruction investments). The research challenges binary interpretations of recognition/non-recognition, proposing instead a model of "de facto alignment without de jure endorsement"—a tactic that preserves Russia's autonomy amid Afghanistan's volatility. The study further highlights how Moscow's historical trauma from the Soviet-Afghan War informs its restraint, distinguishing its approach from U.S. nation-building or China's Belt and Road expansionism. Conclusions posit that Russia's strategy reflects a broader middle-power playbook for navigating multipolarity: exploiting power vacuums through fluid alliances while mitigating reputational and resource costs. The implications extend beyond Afghanistan, offering insights into 21st-century realist diplomacy in contested regions, where non-ideological transactionalism increasingly supplants liberal institutionalism.

Keywords

Russia–Afghanistan relations, Taliban regime, realism in IR, regional security, great power competition, non-recognition diplomacy, counterterrorism

Introduction

Russia's engagement in Afghanistan is deeply embedded in its historical experience, strategic culture, and realist orientation in international politics. The roots of this engagement stretch back to the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan in 1979—a Cold War-driven move justified by the Brezhnev Doctrine to preserve the communist regime of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)

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amidst mounting Islamist opposition. The resulting conflict, which lasted a decade until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, left a deep scar on the Soviet political psyche. With over 15,000 Soviet troops killed and tens of thousands wounded, the war became a costly entanglement, contributing to the erosion of the Soviet economy and legitimacy, as documented by Westad (2017). In the immediate post-withdrawal period, Russia maintained only minimal involvement in Afghan affairs. However, the post-9/11 geopolitical landscape, shaped by the U.S.-led intervention, brought Afghanistan back into Russia's strategic calculations. While officially outside the U.S.-NATO coalition, Russia provided logistical support and intelligence coordination, motivated by the desire to suppress transnational jihadist threats, particularly those with potential spillover effects into Central Asia, as explained by Trenin (2021). This pragmatism became increasingly evident as Russia opened informal communication channels with the Taliban even before their return to power, anticipating future geopolitical shifts. The seismic moment came with the abrupt U.S. withdrawal in August 2021, culminating in the Taliban's swift takeover of Kabul. This development fundamentally altered the regional security environment, triggering strategic recalibrations across Eurasia. For Moscow, the Taliban's resurgence posed both security risks and geopolitical opportunities. On one hand, the re-establishment of an Islamist regime threatened to embolden extremist elements in Central Asia, particularly ISIS-K, and destabilize Russia's soft underbelly through militant infiltration, drug trafficking, and refugee flows. On the other hand, the U.S. withdrawal presented Moscow with a renewed opportunity to reassert regional influence, mediate Afghan diplomacy through platforms like the Moscow Format and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and position itself as a pragmatic actor capable of managing a complex security vacuum, as observed by Korybko (2022). Realist considerations have deeply shaped Russia's engagement with the Taliban since 2021. Rather than seeking ideological alignment or democratic transformation, Moscow has prioritized securing its borders, containing jihadist movements, maintaining strategic influence in Central Asia, and resisting perceived Western encroachment. This explains its careful policy of *de facto* engagement—hosting Taliban delegations, facilitating regional dialogue, and expanding counterterrorism coordination—without extending formal diplomatic recognition, thus avoiding a premature endorsement of a regime still ostracized by much of the international community. This study seeks to unpack the rationale and implications of Russia's post-2021 Taliban policy through a realist lens. It addresses five core research questions that guide the inquiry: (1) What are the primary strategic, security, economic, and diplomatic factors motivating Russia's engagement with the Afghan Taliban since August 2021? (2) How does Russia's relationship with the Taliban

reflect a realist foreign policy approach in the post-U.S. withdrawal context? (3) To what extent has Russia's engagement with the Taliban influenced regional security dynamics in Central Asia, especially concerning ISIS-K and cross-border threats? (4) How was Russia balancing *de facto* cooperation with the Taliban against the dilemma of formal recognition and international legitimacy? and (5) What are the implications of Russia's Taliban policy for its broader geopolitical strategy, particularly in light of its war in Ukraine and growing rivalry with the West? In pursuit of these questions, the study defines the following research objectives: First, to systematically analyze Russia's strategic rationale for engaging with the Taliban regime in the aftermath of the U.S. exit. Second, to evaluate the role of security imperatives, especially ISIS-K and cross-border insurgent threats, in shaping bilateral interactions. Third, to assess the role of economic incentives—particularly energy security and counter-narcotics coordination—in guiding Moscow's approach. Fourth, to explore the role of regional diplomatic platforms such as the Moscow Format, the SCO, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in enabling Russia's engagement. Fifth, to interpret Russia's Taliban policy through the theoretical framework of realism, emphasizing power, threat perception, and regional stability as core drivers. In the final analysis, to examine the broader regional consequences of Russia's Afghan strategy, especially for Central Asia's security architecture and for Moscow's evolving role in the multipolar global order. Framed within the realist paradigm, this study argues that Russia's engagement with the Afghan Taliban from August 2021 until July 2025, when it officially recognized the Taliban government, was a pragmatic and security-oriented foreign policy, designed to protect national interests, manage regional threats, and recalibrate influence in a shifting geopolitical context. Far from being driven by ideological sympathy or normative alignment, Moscow's approach was shaped by state-centric calculations of power and stability. As such, this study not only contributes to scholarly understanding of post-2021 Eurasian geopolitics but also offers an empirically grounded and theoretically informed account of great power behavior in the wake of U.S. retrenchment.

Theoretical Framework

Realism, as a foundational theory in international relations, posits that the international system is anarchic, compelling states to prioritize survival, power maximization, and national security over ideology or normative considerations. In the case of Russia's post-2021 engagement with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, these realist imperatives are manifest in a strategic recalibration focused on containing security threats and preserving influence across Central Asia. Following the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's swift return to power, Moscow's primary

concern became the containment of extremist threats emanating from Afghan territory, particularly the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), which had demonstrated operational reach in the broader region and within Russia itself. The gravity of this threat was demonstrated in March 2024, when, as reported by [DW News \(2025\)](#), ISIS-K claimed responsibility for a terrorist attack in Moscow that killed over 140 civilians. Despite the Taliban's formal classification as a terrorist organization under Russian law since 2003, Russia adopted a realist policy of conditional engagement, driven by shared security interests and regional stability goals. This pragmatic approach was articulated by Zamir Kabulov, Russia's Special Presidential Envoy to Afghanistan, who stated, as cited by [BBC News \(2018\)](#), that "The Taliban interest objectively coincides with ours." This convergence lies primarily in the mutual interest of eradicating ISIS-K, which both actors view as a destabilizing competitor. As a result, Russia maintained its embassy in Kabul after August 2021, one of the few major powers to do so, signaling an implicit recognition of the Taliban's governing authority. These actions underscore the realist axiom that strategic necessity often overrides normative alignment. According to an analysis by the [Swedish Institute of International Affairs \(2025\)](#), Russia's engagement reflects "security-driven realism," wherein cooperation with non-state actors is legitimized when such alliances serve the overarching goals of state security and regional influence. In this framework, Russia's interaction with the Taliban is not an endorsement of their ideology but a calculated move to shield its southern periphery and maintain its geopolitical relevance in a shifting regional order. Beyond the realist paradigm, Russia's nuanced approach to the Taliban also aligns with the conceptual frameworks of strategic hedging and tactical diplomacy, which are increasingly relevant in fluid geopolitical contexts. Strategic hedging refers to the adoption of multiple, often contradictory policies to reduce exposure to risks while keeping future options open. In Russia's case, this has meant engaging with the Taliban pragmatically—offering diplomatic and economic overtures without formal recognition or ideological alignment. This calculated ambiguity was captured by [RUSI \(2025\)](#), which noted President Vladimir Putin's statement that full recognition of the Taliban would depend on whether the group "enters the family of civilized people." Similarly, Russia's ambassador to Afghanistan, Dmitry Zhirnov, praised the Taliban for behaving in a "responsible, civilized manner" in 2021, as reported by the [Swedish Institute of International Affairs \(2025\)](#), illustrating a conditional endorsement based on political behavior rather than legal status. Russia's hedging strategy has involved multiple levels of interaction. It has hosted Taliban delegations at the Moscow Format talks, facilitated discussions within regional frameworks, and even invited Taliban officials to economic forums such as the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in 2022. Notably, in April 2025, Russia's Supreme Court began

reviewing the Taliban's status as a terrorist organization—a move widely interpreted as a precursor to further normalization, though full recognition remains contingent upon assurances regarding terrorism containment and regional stability, as observed by [DW News \(2025\)](#). These developments reflect what [Taieb et al. \(2025\)](#) describe as a "non-ideological, transactional diplomacy," whereby Moscow pursues limited functional cooperation with unrecognized regimes based on a rational cost-benefit analysis. Moreover, Russia's approach allows it to present itself as an indispensable power broker in the post-American regional order. Unlike the United States or European Union, whose engagements are often bound by legalist or normative frameworks, Russia's tactical diplomacy is fluid and adaptable. By avoiding premature recognition and maintaining strategic ambiguity, Russia was maximizing leverage over the Taliban while insulating itself from potential fallout should the regime collapse or backtrack on commitments. This dual-track engagement also enables Moscow to balance between regional actors such as Iran, China, and Central Asian republics, many of whom have divergent but overlapping interests in Afghanistan. Thus, strategic hedging provided Russia with a flexible toolkit to navigate volatility, preserve autonomy, and assert regional leadership without entrapment in rigid alliances or ideological postures. As has been demonstrated, Russia's engagement with the Taliban post-2021 illustrated the intersection of realist imperatives and hedging strategies in a complex geopolitical environment. Rooted in the logic of security and power, Moscow's foreign policy behavior revealed a preference for strategic pragmatism over ideological consistency. Through a blend of conditional engagement until July 2025, tactical diplomacy, and institutional ambiguity, Russia recalibrated its Afghanistan policy to align with core interests in regional stability and influence. This approach underscores a broader trend in international relations, wherein middle and great powers increasingly employ hedging and transactionalism as adaptive responses to systemic uncertainty.

Contextualizing the Taliban's Rise and Regional Realignments

The Collapse of the Afghan Republic (2001-2021). The collapse of the Afghan Republic in 2021, triggered by the U.S. withdrawal, was one of the most significant geopolitical events in recent history. The rapid ascent of the Taliban to power, in conjunction with the ensuing regional power vacuum, has reshaped the political and strategic landscape of South and Central Asia. This analysis critically examines the factors contributing to the Afghan Republic's collapse, the subsequent Taliban takeover, and the regional realignments that followed, with a focus on the broader geopolitical ramifications. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, finalized in August 2021, was part of a broader strategy to end what was widely regarded as America's longest-running

war. The withdrawal followed the Doha Agreement of 2020, in which the U.S. agreed to pull out its forces, provided that the Taliban would engage in peace talks with the Afghan government and refrain from harboring terrorist groups, as outlined by the U.S. Department of State (2020). As President [Joe Biden \(2021\)](#) explained, “The choice was to end the war or escalate it. I chose to end it,” reflecting a desire to extricate the U.S. from a protracted conflict. The withdrawal, however, was executed hastily, contributing to the rapid collapse of Afghan institutions and the overwhelming victory of the Taliban. In a matter of weeks, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), composed of nearly 300,000 troops, failed to mount a credible defense against the Taliban’s well-coordinated offensive. The [Afghan Studies Center \(2024\)](#) emphasized that the ANDSF’s collapse was indicative of broader systemic weaknesses within the Afghan state, including rampant corruption, poor morale, and inadequate leadership. The power vacuum created by the U.S. departure was further exacerbated by the Afghan government’s inability to stabilize the country in the face of mounting Taliban pressure. The Taliban’s swift military victories were not just a result of superior fighting capabilities but also stemmed from widespread defections within the Afghan military and security apparatus, along with a lack of popular support for the government. [Chatham House \(2025b\)](#) documented how, by mid-August 2021, the Taliban had captured major provincial capitals, including Mazar-i-Sharif, Jalalabad, and Kabul, effectively toppling the Afghan Republic. As the Taliban advanced towards Kabul, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, leaving behind a government in disarray. The Taliban’s control of Kabul was completed on August 15, 2021, marking the official collapse of the Afghan government. In addition to the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban’s success was facilitated by the group’s internal consolidation. Since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban had been organizing, regrouping, and recruiting, gradually enhancing their military capabilities. By the time the U.S. withdrawal was finalized, the Taliban had established a network of leaders, militants, and supporters that were deeply embedded within Afghanistan’s rural areas, making their comeback more resilient and difficult to counteract. The internal consolidation of the Taliban was symbolized by the leadership of Haibatullah Akhundzada, who, despite operating from the shadows for much of the insurgency, took on a more visible role in the aftermath of the group’s success. As declared by a Taliban spokesman (2021), Akhundzada proclaimed in August 2021, “The victory is the result of the sacrifices of our brave fighters. This is the beginning of a new era for Afghanistan.” The Taliban’s rapid takeover was accompanied by promises of a more inclusive government and respect for human rights, particularly the rights of women and minorities. However, these promises quickly unraveled, as the Taliban’s governance, led by a hardline group of leaders,

failed to live up to international expectations. According to the [UN Security Council Report \(2024a\)](#), the group’s oppressive policies towards women, including restrictions on education and employment, became one of the most significant points of contention. The Taliban’s refusal to allow girls above the sixth grade to attend school and its imposition of a strict interpretation of Islamic law highlighted the discrepancy between their rhetoric and actions. These actions led to widespread protests and condemnation, both within Afghanistan and from the international community. The collapse of the Afghan Republic also set in motion a series of regional realignments. The U.S. departure created a power vacuum that invited intervention and engagement from regional actors, each of whom had their strategic interests in Afghanistan. Russia, a key player in the region, recognized the Taliban’s role in Afghanistan and engaged with them diplomatically. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, as cited by the [International Institute for Strategic Studies \(IISS, 2024a\)](#), emphasized, “We have no illusions about the Taliban, but our task is to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan and prevent the spread of terrorism to Central Asia.” Russia’s primary interest lay in preventing the spread of extremism into its Central Asian allies, which were vulnerable to Taliban influence. As such, Russia, while wary of the Taliban’s ideological stance, sought to engage pragmatically with the group to safeguard regional security. Similarly, China, which shares a border with Afghanistan, adjusted its policy to establish a cooperative relationship with the Taliban. Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi \(2021\)](#) noted, “China is ready to support Afghanistan’s development, and we hope to cooperate with the new Afghan government.” China’s engagement with the Taliban was primarily motivated by its desire to secure access to Afghanistan’s vast natural resources and to ensure that Afghanistan did not become a source of instability along its western borders. However, China’s approach was also tempered by its desire to maintain stability in the region, particularly regarding its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its efforts to counter extremism in its Xinjiang province. The realignment of regional powers was not limited to Russia and China. Iran, which shares a long border with Afghanistan, found itself balancing between pragmatic cooperation with the Taliban and its support for Afghan Shia minorities. [Vohra \(2024a\)](#) explains that Iran had historically provided support to groups opposed to the Taliban, but after their return to power, Iran’s approach became more cautious, seeking to stabilize the region through diplomatic engagement while also advocating for the protection of its Shia population in Afghanistan. Iran’s dual approach was emblematic of the broader regional challenge.

Russia’s Regional Environment Post-2021

In the wake of the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan, Russia has recalibrated its regional strategy, placing

increased emphasis on its southern periphery, specifically Afghanistan and the broader Central Asian region. This reorientation is driven by intersecting imperatives—mitigating acute security threats, especially from transnational jihadist groups; counterbalancing Western influence in a restructured geopolitical order; and asserting a stabilizing role in Eurasia. Anchored in regionalism and economic interdependence theory, Russia's evolving posture reflects a confluence of pragmatic diplomacy, regional security cooperation, and great power competition within a multipolar world framework. Russia's strategic calculus post-2021 is centered on a tripartite concern: the proliferation of terrorism from Afghanistan into the former Soviet republics, the vacuum left by the U.S. withdrawal, which Moscow seeks to exploit for geopolitical leverage, and the necessity of consolidating its influence in a region that constitutes a geopolitical buffer against instability. The Kremlin views Afghanistan as a key pressure point in maintaining regional stability, particularly in light of the growing threat posed by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), whose operational activities have directly impacted Russian national security. [Vohra \(2024b\)](#) highlights that the deadly March 2024 attack at Moscow's Crocus City Hall, which killed over 224 people and was claimed by ISKP, sharply underscored this threat, prompting a recalibration of Russia's counterterrorism priorities. In this context, the Taliban—despite lacking formal international recognition—have emerged as a de facto bulwark against ISKP expansion. Intelligence and field reports, as cited by [Vohra \(2024c\)](#), indicate that Taliban crackdowns have curtailed ISKP operations by over 30% since 2021, thereby aligning partially with Russia's security interests. This dynamic has informed Moscow's pragmatic engagement with Kabul's new rulers. According to the [UN Security Council Report \(2024b\)](#) and the [International Institute for Strategic Studies \(IISS, 2024b\)](#), Russia has maintained its embassy in Kabul, engaged Taliban representatives in multiple formats, and allowed the appointment of Taliban diplomats, thus highlighting its preference for "situational diplomacy" over rigid normative alignment. Moreover, [Shekhawat \(2024a\)](#) asserts that Moscow perceives the Taliban's return not merely as a security challenge but as a strategic opening to expand Russian influence, particularly in tandem with China and Iran, through platforms such as the Moscow Format, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and CSTO military exercises. This interpretation underscores how the withdrawal of NATO forces is viewed in Russia as a historic opportunity to reshape the Eurasian balance of power ([UNSC, 2024d](#)). Russia's engagement with Afghanistan and Central Asia has taken on tangible dimensions in recent years. [Vohra \(2024d\)](#) reports that ISKP's capacity for major attacks has declined—from 20 large-scale attacks in 2021 to 12 in 2023—largely attributed to Taliban crackdowns. Meanwhile, according to the [World Bank \(2025a\)](#), Russian trade with Afghanistan has

grown incrementally, with exports of gasoline and wheat reaching 200,000 and 150,000 tons, respectively, in 2023, despite falling short of the Kremlin's 1-million-ton annual target due to logistical bottlenecks and Afghan economic fragility. Diplomatically, the [UN Security Council Report \(2024c\)](#) documents that Russia hosted Taliban representatives at four international gatherings in 2024, including the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum and Moscow Format dialogues. Furthermore, Russia formally accredited Taliban diplomats in June 2023, positioning itself among the first major powers to engage in functional diplomatic normalization without formal recognition, until July 2025. Security cooperation in the Central Asian neighborhood has also intensified, as the [IISS \(2024c\)](#) reports that the CSTO conducted three joint exercises in 2024 focused on counterinsurgency and border security scenarios related to Afghan instability. These actions have been accompanied by explicit policy rationales from Russian and Taliban officials. In 2024, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov remarked, "The Taliban, whether we like it or not, are the reality in Afghanistan. We must engage them constructively to prevent the export of terrorism and drugs across the region." Similarly, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid emphasized in a 2023 Moscow briefing that, "We have taken serious action against Daesh (ISKP) and continue to cooperate with neighboring countries to ensure regional peace," as cited by [Shekhawat \(2024b\)](#). Academic experts reinforce this interpretation. [Vohra \(2024e\)](#) characterizes Russia's approach as "interest-driven realism," noting that the Kremlin has chosen to "engage the Taliban tactically without legitimizing their rule ideologically." [Chatham House \(2025a\)](#) further observes that Moscow's approach, while devoid of normative commitments to human rights or democratic governance, reflects a rational choice paradigm emphasizing regional order and power equilibrium. Critics argue that Russia's overtures to the Taliban undermine international efforts to isolate an authoritarian regime that has systematically dismantled women's rights and suppressed civil liberties. Western officials, particularly from the U.S. and EU, as noted in the [UN Security Council Report \(2024d\)](#), have cautioned against granting the Taliban any form of diplomatic legitimacy, warning that this undermines international pressure for reform. However, proponents of Russia's policy offer a compelling rebuttal rooted in realpolitik. [Vohra \(2024f\)](#) argues that while the West remains entangled in normative debates, Russia has adopted a security-first approach that prioritizes stability over idealism. Furthermore, Russia's policy does not entail unconditional support; rather, it is contingent upon Taliban actions against ISKP and drug trafficking. The Kremlin has made it clear that any long-term engagement will depend on the Taliban's ability to deliver on counterterrorism and regional security. It is therefore evident that Russia's post-2021 regional strategy until July 2025, when it formally recognized the Taliban in Afghanistan, was marked by a blend of

calculated pragmatism, geopolitical opportunism, and strategic deterrence. Facing intensifying threats from jihadist groups and reduced Western presence, Moscow has repositioned itself as a primary guarantor of regional stability, particularly in Afghanistan and Central Asia. While its approach raises normative and ethical concerns, it is firmly grounded in the logic of national interest and regional calculations.

Analytical Examination of Russia–Taliban Engagement

Geopolitical and Strategic Imperatives. Russia's engagement with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, especially after the 2021 U.S. withdrawal until Russia recognized the Taliban's government on 3rd July 2025, must be examined as a calculated and multidimensional geopolitical maneuver rooted in historical experience, strategic calculus, and evolving regional dynamics. This engagement was fundamentally shaped by Russia's pursuit of regional stability, security containment, and strategic autonomy in a shifting global order marked by the decline of U.S. hegemonic influence and the rise of multipolarity. At the core of Russia–Taliban engagement lies a mutual opposition to Western—particularly U.S.—presence and influence in the region. Unlike the West, Russia had maintained a discreet yet consistent backchannel diplomacy with the Taliban even before their official return to power. These early engagements were driven by Realist considerations, seeking to secure Russian strategic interests without directly legitimizing the Taliban. As the [Brookings Institution \(2024\)](#) documents, Moscow had hosted Taliban delegations under the Moscow Format talks as early as the late 2010s, strategically positioning itself as a regional power broker. Security analyst insightfully observes that “Russia's pre-2021 Taliban contacts were prescient, ensuring influence when the West fled.” This strategic foresight now enables Russia to leverage existing diplomatic channels to advance its regional agenda while circumventing the constraints of formal recognition. Russia's approach is not guided by ideological alignment but by pragmatic security calculus. President Putin, in a July address, acknowledged this position by stating, “The Taliban's control is a reality we must work with to counter terrorism and stabilize the region.” Accordingly, Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is perceived not as an ideological ally but as a de facto buffer state. From the perspective of regionalism and connectivity, Russia's turn toward its southern periphery—including Central and South Asia—reflects a broader strategic recalibration catalyzed by the Ukraine crisis and the intensifying confrontation with the West. Russia's avoidance of direct military entanglement in Afghanistan is also shaped by historical memory. The Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989) casts a long shadow over Moscow's strategic psyche, informing its cautious diplomacy. As Solace Global (2024) notes, Russia continues to

engage Afghanistan through diplomacy and trade while deliberately steering clear of military involvement, thereby adhering to the Realist doctrine of strategic cost-benefit analysis. Furthermore, Russia's engagement strategy aligns with economic interdependence logic as Moscow seeks to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions by diversifying its foreign partnerships. Afghanistan's value, while currently limited in economic terms, lies in its potential as a symbolic and logistical corridor for energy diplomacy and infrastructure development with Central Asia. Critics of Moscow's policy argue that engagement with the Taliban risks legitimizing a regime widely condemned for its human rights abuses and authoritarian governance. [Roza-Otunbayeva \(2024\)](#), head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), cautioned in a UN Security Council briefing that “Russia's engagement exploits Western failures but risks overlooking Taliban governance flaws.” Nonetheless, Russian officials justify their approach based on Realpolitik. From this perspective, geopolitical realities in Afghanistan supersede normative ideals, particularly given the demonstrated ineffectiveness of liberal governance models promoted by the West. As highlighted by the [Brookings Institution \(2024\)](#), the Russia–Taliban partnership is illustrative of “strategic regionalism,” in which great powers engage pragmatically with local actors to promote regional security, even in the absence of formal recognition or democratic legitimacy. This manner of engagement also illuminates the strategic utility of non-state actors in great power politics. The Taliban, in this case, are instrumentalized to advance Russian objectives without the trappings of formal alliance structures. Russian officials frequently rebut normative criticisms by invoking sovereignty and non-intervention. During an April 2024 Moscow Format session, Zamir Kabulov emphasized, “The U.S. left chaos in Afghanistan; Russia engages to prevent another Western failure.” This underscores Moscow's approach as one of containment and stability rather than ideological endorsement ([Kabulov, 2024](#)). As a result, Russia's engagement with the Taliban is best understood through the prism of strategic necessity, regional pragmatism, and systemic realignment. It reflects the intricate interplay between geopolitical urgency, economic adaptation, and security imperatives in a global order where Western hegemony is waning and multipolarity is ascendant.

Security Considerations and Counterterrorism. In the aftermath of the Taliban's resurgence, Russia has adopted a pragmatically calibrated and Realist-informed approach toward Afghanistan—an approach rooted in its evolving security imperatives rather than ideological affinities. The Taliban's repeated assurances that Afghan territory would not be used to threaten Russian interests, along with its active confrontation with the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISIS-

K), have become central to Russia's recalibrated engagement strategy. This section offers an exhaustive, academically grounded, and empirically substantiated analysis of the strategic logic underpinning Moscow's security dialogue with the Taliban, framed within the theoretical paradigms of defensive realism, regionalism, and economic interdependence. At the heart of Russia's security engagement is the Taliban's formal and informal commitment to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a launchpad for terrorist activities against the Russian Federation or its Central Asian allies. Senior Taliban officials have repeatedly conveyed these assurances in multilateral and bilateral settings. During a pivotal interaction in late 2023, the Taliban government reaffirmed its pledge not to allow any "anti-Russian militant operations" from Afghan soil, as documented in the 2024 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Report, thereby signaling its willingness to act as a security buffer. This pledge was reiterated by Russian Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, who emphasized in a statement reported by the TASS news agency in 2024, "We do not idealize the Taliban, but they are a reality that must be engaged to combat greater threats like ISIS-K." This reflects a fundamental shift in Russian strategic thinking—from confrontation with the Taliban during the Soviet occupation to cautious engagement under the shadow of transnational jihadist threats. A central element of convergence between Moscow and Kabul is the shared objective of neutralizing ISIS-K, a group that both actors perceive as a mutual and existential threat. Since 2022, the Islamic State affiliate has dramatically escalated its activities, conducting transnational attacks in Iran, Pakistan, and most notably, Russia itself. The March 2024 terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall in Moscow, which resulted in over 140 civilian deaths, was explicitly attributed to ISIS-K by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in its 2024 public disclosures (Russian Federation, 2024). This attack catalyzed a deeper recalibration in Russian foreign policy. President Vladimir Putin acknowledged this shift in a televised address released by the Kremlin Press Office in 2024, stating, "ISIS-K is our common enemy. Cooperation with those fighting them on the ground—even the Taliban—is now a necessity, not a choice" (Putin, 2024). The Taliban, for its part, responded swiftly by intensifying operations against ISIS-K cells in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces, claiming dozens of arrests and killings in joint internal campaigns reported in the 2024 UNAMA Briefing. From a strategic vantage point, the absence of viable alternative power centers in Afghanistan further strengthens the Taliban's indispensability in Russia's security calculus. Analysts from the International Crisis Group emphasized in their 2024 report that "There are simply no other actors on the ground with the reach, coercive capacity, or territorial presence to counter ISIS-K or ensure transborder stability." This monopoly on force—though problematic from a normative governance standpoint—nonetheless confers upon the

Taliban a de facto authority in Russian eyes. The Central Asia Policy Research Institute (CAPRI) stated in its 2024 assessment that the Taliban's control over 90% of Afghanistan's territory and its command over coercive institutions like the police and intelligence agencies make it the sole interlocutor for regional stability negotiations. Similarly, Roza Otunbayeva, Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), framed this reality concisely in a 2024 briefing by asserting, "The Taliban's territorial control and fight against ISIS-K have made them a de facto security guarantor—even if imperfect." Critics, however, present significant counterarguments. Human rights groups and liberal internationalist scholars have warned that legitimizing Taliban control in pursuit of counterterrorism dilutes global norms regarding governance and human rights. In its 2024 report, Human Rights Watch documented that the Taliban continues to impose harsh restrictions on women, suppress minority rights, and has not severed all historical ties with groups like al-Qaeda. Moreover, concerns persist that the Taliban's counterterrorism posture is performative rather than strategic. A 2024 report by the Brookings Institution cautioned that "Engagement based solely on counterterrorism yields short-term tactical gains at the cost of long-term strategic instability." Skeptics argue that Russia's strategy could backfire by emboldening similar ideological movements in its volatile North Caucasus and Volga regions. Yet these critiques are not without robust rebuttals. Russian strategists contend that their engagement is not about political endorsement but strategic containment. As outlined in a 2025 report by the RAND Corporation, "Moscow's logic is transactional: Taliban cooperation is the price of stabilizing the Afghan frontier and preventing the seepage of jihadist ideologies into Central Asia." Moscow further mitigates ideological risks by maintaining diplomatic ambiguity, engaging the Taliban without formal recognition or normalization. In doing so, Russia retains leverage while extracting security benefits. Additionally, the operational outcomes of Taliban-led offensives against ISIS-K suggest that the Taliban is not merely posturing but actively degrading ISIS-K's capabilities. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), in its 2024 evaluation, corroborated these claims by documenting successful anti-ISIS operations carried out by Taliban forces. Echoing this perspective, expert Ankit Vohra of the Observer Research Foundation stated in 2024b that "Russia's engagement is driven not by friendship but by necessity. The Taliban are the only force keeping ISIS-K in check." The foregoing discussion has shown that Russia's counterterrorism cooperation with the Taliban reflects a paradigmatic shift from ideological rigidity to pragmatic realism. The Taliban's assurances on Russian security, demonstrated hostility toward ISIS-K, monopoly over Afghan territory, and role in preventing cross-border terror threats form the empirical and strategic bedrock of this evolving relationship. While this engagement raises valid

ethical and normative questions, Russia's priorities remain anchored in regional security, especially after the Crocus attack. By recognizing the Taliban as a functional—if flawed—security partner, Russia seeks to stabilize its southern flank, prevent the export of terrorism, and counterbalance NATO's regional absence. This represents a nuanced form of Realist diplomacy in a post-hegemonic regional order and adds to the broader academic understanding of how states recalibrate foreign policy under asymmetrical threat environments.

Economic Policy: From Minimalism to Emerging Opportunities. Between 2021 and the period leading up to Russia's formal recognition of the Taliban's government, Moscow's engagement with Afghanistan was shaped by two interlinked policy priorities: counter-narcotics cooperation and cautious economic diplomacy. Initially minimalist and constrained by Afghanistan's severe economic contraction—gross domestic product (GDP) fell by approximately 26% between 2021 and 2023—and the impact of Western sanctions, Russia's approach reflected a realist assessment of both regional security threats and emerging opportunities (IISS, 2024d; World Bank, 2025c). Over 90% of Afghans were reported to be living below the poverty line during this period (World Bank, 2025d), which, combined with Afghanistan's fragile fiscal base and near-total dependence on external aid, compelled Moscow to pursue a narrowly defined, sanctions-compliant pattern of engagement focused on essential goods, barter arrangements, and limited humanitarian assistance. A pivotal entry point for Russian engagement was the Taliban's April 2022 ban on poppy cultivation, which the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024) estimated reduced opium output by 95%, from approximately 233,000 ha in 2022 to 10,800 ha in 2023. Given that Afghanistan had previously supplied roughly 80% of the global heroin market, with significant inflows transiting Central Asia into Russia, the ban was hailed in Moscow as a “regional security dividend” (IISS, 2024e; UNODC, 2024). Russian leaders portrayed the reduction as a significant gain against the transnational narcotics trade, which had long fueled corruption, insurgency financing, and public health crises in the region (IISS, 2024b). However, enforcement challenges soon became apparent. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS, 2024c) recorded a 20% increase in methamphetamine seizures in 2023, indicating possible substitution effects rather than a full resolution of Afghanistan's drug economy. The socio-economic consequences of the ban were severe. Approximately 500,000 farmers were displaced from a high-value cash crop, resulting in an estimated income loss of \$1.4 billion (USIP, 2024). In provinces such as Badakhshan, eradication campaigns in 2024 triggered protests and violent clashes, underscoring governance capacity limitations and uneven enforcement (IISS, 2024f). Critics from institutionalist perspectives argued that Russia's

support for the ban—absent conditionality on governance reforms—risked exacerbating rural poverty and social instability (UNDP, 2023). Nonetheless, Russian officials publicly praised the Taliban's anti-narcotics stance. President Vladimir Putin, in a July speech, described the ban as “a step toward regional stability” (UNODC, 2024), while Special Presidential Envoy Zamir Kabulov urged that such measures be reciprocated with sanctions relief and constructive engagement (IISS, 2024g). In parallel, Russia pursued incremental economic cooperation, primarily through sanctions-exempt barter trade. In 2023, Moscow exported approximately 200,000 tons of gasoline and 150,000 tons of wheat to Afghanistan (World Bank, 2025d) and provided \$10 million in humanitarian aid (World Bank, 2025e). Bilateral trade, valued at \$1 billion in 2023—a 34% increase from 2022—remained modest in global terms, but the World Bank (2025b) projected growth to \$3 billion by 2025 and \$10 billion by 2030, contingent on the expansion of barter mechanisms and transport infrastructure. From 2024 onward, analysts observed a shift from short-term stabilization toward securing Afghanistan's long-term resource and transit potential as part of Russia's broader multipolar strategy to bypass Western-controlled routes (Shekhawat, IISS, 2024a). Afghanistan's estimated \$1 trillion in untapped mineral wealth, particularly lithium and copper, emerged as a central attraction (World Bank, 2025a). Strategic infrastructure initiatives included early-stage discussions on a \$500 million railway project (Shekhawat, 2024c) and, more significantly, the April 2025 agreement with Uzbekistan to construct the \$7 billion, 1,700-km Trans-Afghan Railway, linking Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, with feasibility studies scheduled for early 2026 (EurasiaNet, 2025). These infrastructure and resource plans coincided with discussions at the 2024 Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit regarding the potential revival of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline, which is envisioned as a strategic energy corridor connecting Central and South Asia. Expert commentary offers both optimism and caution. Proponents, such as S. Frederick Starr (EDB, 2024) and Angela Stanzel (IISS, 2024b), contend that infrastructure development and resource exploitation could unlock \$10 billion in trade potential by 2030, bolster Russia's sanctions resilience, and advance Eurasian integration. Conversely, institutionalist and development-oriented critiques highlight Afghanistan's fragile governance structures, ongoing sanctions, and the destabilizing effects of rural income loss caused by the opium ban (ADB, 2025; UNDP, 2023). The Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2025) has expressed skepticism over optimistic trade forecasts, citing persistent political instability within the Taliban regime. Chatham House (2025c) characterizes Russia's approach as “low-cost, high-flexibility,” combining selective cooperation, humanitarian incentives, and incremental project development while avoiding overcommitment. Analysts describe this as

pragmatic regionalism, in which Moscow prioritizes situational convergence on border security, trade access, and narcotics control over ideological alignment (IISS, 2024c; Shekhawat, 2024d). Realist interpretations suggest that by advancing relations incrementally and maintaining reversibility, Russia positions itself advantageously should Afghanistan achieve broader international legitimacy or emerge as a viable transit hub. The above evidence presented affirms that Russia's combined economic and narcotics policy toward the Taliban has evolved from a sanction-constrained minimalist framework to a strategic programme that links counter-narcotics cooperation with the pursuit of long-term economic opportunities. While this shift holds the potential to advance Moscow's multipolar ambitions, it remains constrained by Afghanistan's weak economic base, fragile governance, sanctions, and the social consequences of opium eradication. The approach enables Russia to claim moral high ground in regional forums, secure potential resources and corridor access, and retain policy flexibility, reflecting a deliberate balance between strategic ambition and pragmatic risk management.

Afghan Perceptions and Domestic Interpretations. Afghan civil society actors, particularly women's rights groups, have expressed alarm over Russia's 2025 decision to remove the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations and signal formal recognition. This step is widely interpreted as legitimizing a system of governance characterized by what activists describe as gender apartheid (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2025a). Women's networks argue that such diplomatic shifts risk normalizing more than 80 restrictive edicts issued by the Taliban in 2024 targeting women's education, mobility, and employment, which have resulted in 1.4 million girls being denied schooling and a 50% decline in female workforce participation (HRW, 2025b; United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2024). Prominent activists, such as Mahbouba Seraj, Director of the Afghan Women's Network, have argued that "Russia's recognition erases women's erasure, deepening gender apartheid" (Ms Magazine, 2025). Journalists and media professionals have likewise criticized Moscow's position for its silence on human rights issues. According to the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA, 2024) data, between 2023 and 2024, at least 168 journalists were detained, while 64% of those surveyed reported self-censoring due to threats. HRW researcher Fereshta Abbasi (EUAA, 2024) similarly observed that Afghan journalists often refrain from openly criticizing the Russia–Taliban relationship, fearing reprisals, while still raising concerns in international forums. Public opinion is far from uniform. Policy experts have noted mixed sentiments, with some viewing Russia as a stabilizing actor against the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), while others warn that engagement risks entrenching repression (Observer Research Foundation [ORF], 2025; United States Institute of Peace [USIP], 2024). For example,

Haroun Rahimi, a professor at the American University of Afghanistan, argued that Russia "stabilizes against ISIS-K, but risks normalizing Taliban rule" (USIP, 2024). Opposition activists condemned the move as eroding Afghanistan's remaining levers against global isolation (HRW, 2025a). These tensions are compounded by Afghanistan's severe humanitarian crisis. UNDP (2023) estimates indicate that 69% of Afghans now live in poverty. The return of approximately 515,000 refugees in 2023–2024 has further amplified the voices of opposition groups (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], 2025). According to Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (ORF, 2025), the convergence of economic deprivation with political recognition fuels protests, especially among women's groups. Opposing viewpoints emphasize that Russia's engagement provides much-needed economic assistance and security cooperation at a time when Afghanistan's isolation exacerbates humanitarian suffering (UNDP, 2023). Pro-Taliban narratives highlight governance achievements such as the reported reduction in opium cultivation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). Yet, from a realist perspective, these claims overlook the limited reach of aid and the structural nature of repression, as indicated by the persistence of 80 restrictive edicts and continuing arbitrary detentions (EUAA, 2024; HRW, 2025b). In light of the above, Afghan perceptions of Russia's evolving engagement reflect a pragmatic–normative divide: while some actors welcome Moscow's role in counterterrorism and regional stability, others regard recognition as a tacit endorsement of authoritarian governance. These interpretations align with realist critiques that emphasize state interests over normative considerations, underscoring how strategic engagement can simultaneously stabilize and legitimize repressive regimes.

Regional Diplomacy and Strategic Balancing. Russia's engagement with the Taliban regime from August 2021 until July 2025 revealed a carefully calibrated policy of regional diplomacy and strategic balancing, motivated by a complex blend of geopolitical pragmatism, regional security imperatives, and diplomatic flexibility. Moscow's strategy is centered on four key pillars: the activation of multilateral platforms like the Moscow Format and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); the consolidation of regional consensus on the Taliban's de facto control; the necessity to avoid a second strategic front due to the ongoing war in Ukraine; and the potential removal of the Taliban from Russia's official list of terrorist organizations. These developments represent a nuanced convergence of realpolitik and regional security management, reflective of Russia's evolving foreign policy posture in a multipolar world. At the heart of this attitude lies Russia's utilization of the Moscow Format and its proactive role within the SCO. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2024e), Russia hosted three Moscow Format meetings in 2024, with

participation from nine regional states, including China, Iran, Pakistan, and the Central Asian Republics. These meetings provided an inclusive framework for engaging the Taliban leadership without formal recognition, reinforcing Moscow's role as a key mediator in regional Afghan policy. Furthermore, the [United Nations Security Council Report \(2024e\)](#) highlights that in the 2024 SCO Summit, discussions on Afghanistan were prioritized, and 10 member and observer states endorsed enhanced counterterrorism coordination. Notably, Russia backed Taliban participation as observers, underscoring its pragmatic policy to include the Taliban in regional conversations despite the absence of international recognition. This approach is underpinned by a shared regional consensus on the Taliban's de facto control of Afghanistan. Although divergent in ideological orientation and national interests, regional actors such as China, Iran, Pakistan, India, and the Central Asian Republics converge on the strategic necessity of engaging the Taliban to prevent the re-emergence of instability, extremism, and refugee outflows, as emphasized by the [UNSCR \(2024b\)](#). Russia has positioned itself as a central broker in harmonizing these positions, particularly in balancing Pakistan's emphasis on anti-TTP assurances, Iran's protection of Hazara Shias, and India's concern over cross-border terrorism. This reflects a form of regionalism in practice, where neighboring states opt for practical cooperation over normative disagreements. A pivotal constraint driving Russia's policy recalibration has been the Ukrainian war, which has significantly strained Russia's strategic bandwidth. [Shekhawat \(2024f\)](#) reports that with over 3,000 Russian casualties in 2024 and a defense budget exceeding \$120 billion, Moscow is keen to avoid opening a second front in Afghanistan. The March 2024 ISIS-K attack on the Crocus City Hall in Moscow, which the Kremlin attributed to transnational terror networks rooted in Afghanistan, further galvanized this engagement, as discussed by [Vohra \(2024c\)](#). Rather than disengaging, Russia opted to deepen dialogue with the Taliban, viewing them as a buffer against jihadist spillover and a stabilizing force capable of curbing groups like ISIS-K. A significant diplomatic development reflecting this trajectory is Russia's consideration to remove the Taliban from its official list of terrorist organizations, a designation in place since 2003. In June 2024, [Vohra \(2024d\)](#) reports that the Russian Foreign Ministry formally proposed delisting the Taliban, with deliberations underway in the Supreme Court. The rationale, articulated at the St. Petersburg International Forum, was rooted in realpolitik: formal delisting would facilitate direct security, trade, and humanitarian cooperation without implying ideological endorsement. This proposal reflects Russia's strategic pragmatism and its evolving conception of sovereignty and non-intervention, aligning with the broader normative shift among Eurasian powers away from Western liberal conditionalities. Russian President Vladimir Putin succinctly captured this logic, stating on July 4, in Moscow:

"Engaging the Taliban ensures regional stability, vital as we face Western aggression elsewhere." This comment underscores the Kremlin's attempt to link its Afghan strategy to its broader geostrategic contest with the West, where Afghanistan becomes a theater of "strategic denial" rather than conquest or reform. Expert assessments reinforce this logic. [Shekhawat \(2024a\)](#) notes that Russia views Taliban engagement as "a necessary evil to maintain order on the periphery while its core security interests are consumed by the Ukraine conflict." Similarly, [Vohra \(2024e\)](#) argues that delisting the Taliban is not an endorsement of their governance but a recalibration of Russia's security calculus in light of growing threats from ISIS-K and the constraints of the Ukrainian front. Yet this policy is not without counterarguments. Critics contend that engagement without conditionality risks legitimizing repressive Taliban practices, including gender apartheid and ethnic exclusion. It may also erode Russia's normative credibility, particularly in international forums where Moscow continues to project itself as a defender of international law and sovereignty. Furthermore, [UNSCR \(2024c\)](#) warns that delisting the Taliban while many of its factions continue to harbor international terrorists, including remnants of Al-Qaeda, could invite international backlash and further complicate Russia's diplomatic relations with the West. However, rebuttals to these critiques rest on the argument that diplomatic engagement does not equate to recognition or endorsement. As articulated by Russian officials and echoed in multilateral platforms, the primary goal remains regional stabilization, not regime legitimization. By involving the Taliban in regional frameworks like the SCO and Moscow Format, [IISS \(2024d\)](#) emphasizes that Russia aims to institutionalize responsibility, subjecting the Taliban to collective oversight and peer pressure, particularly on issues like counterterrorism and drug trafficking. Moreover, given the absence of viable alternatives and the ineffectiveness of isolationist policies, engagement emerges as a rational and necessary path within realist paradigms. In synthesizing the arguments, Russia's approach to Afghanistan under Taliban control is best understood as an exercise in strategic balancing—one that seeks to contain instability, preserve regional leadership, and manage resource constraints under the shadow of the Ukraine war. Through multilateralism, pragmatic consensus-building, and a flexible interpretation of diplomatic norms, Moscow has crafted a policy that reflects the imperatives of regional security over ideological purity. This shift marks a departure from Russia's prior, more rigid stance and reflects an evolving strategic culture grounded in pragmatic regionalism and multipolar diplomacy. It provides a holistic framing of Russia's Afghan policy as a confluence of regional diplomacy, security rationality, and strategic recalibration. Chronologically, on April 17, 2025, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, acting upon a March 2025 petition by Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov, formally removed the Taliban from

its national terrorist list ([Independent, 2025](#); [Moscow Times, 2025](#)), ending a classification in place since 2003 originally linked to the insurgency in Russia's North Caucasus region. The shift reflected a multi-layered recalibration in Moscow's foreign policy, shaped by security imperatives—most notably countering the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K) following the March 2024 Moscow attack that killed 145 people and injured 551 ([President of the Russian Federation, 2024](#); [U.S. State Department, 2023](#))—as well as geopolitical and economic calculations, including diminishing U.S. influence in Afghanistan after the 2021 withdrawal, deepening non-Western regional alignments, and exploiting trade and infrastructure opportunities ([Vohra, 2024f](#); [World Bank, 2025c](#)). The April 2025 delisting constituted a decisive pivot toward conditional engagement and potential recognition, signaling Moscow's attempt to balance immediate security needs with long-term strategic objectives while navigating the tension between pragmatism and international human rights and counterterrorism standards. This trajectory culminated on July 3, 2025, when Russia formally recognized the Taliban government, marking a decisive inflection point in its Afghan policy that converged security imperatives, geopolitical ambitions, and economic pragmatism. Accepting the credentials of Ambassador Gul Hassan at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MID], Russia became the first major power to grant the Taliban full diplomatic legitimacy, challenging Western-led isolation strategies ([Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025](#); [International Institute for Strategic Studies \[IISS\], 2025](#)). The recognition followed incremental measures, including the April 17 delisting—enabled by December 2024 counterterrorism law amendments—and the upgrading of the Taliban's Moscow mission to ambassadorial status earlier in the year ([Independent, 2025](#); [The Moscow Times, 2025](#)). Reinforced by Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's 2024 delisting and their engagement with the Taliban at Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) forums ([EurasiaNet, 2025](#); [TASS, 2024](#)), Moscow's move emerged as the culmination of progressive diplomatic engagement, regional signaling, and pragmatic bargaining. While it aligned with counterterrorism and economic agendas, strengthened Eurasian partnerships, and symbolically contested Western isolation, embedding Afghanistan's de facto rulers into the international order without substantive governance or human rights concessions demands continuous strategic management to mitigate political and security risks.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined Russia's evolving engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, situating the analysis within broader regional power dynamics and strategic behavior. It finds that until July 2025, as Russia formally recognized the

Taliban government, its policy toward Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was grounded in pragmatic realism, characterized by a deliberate balancing act between security cooperation and political restraint, diplomatic dialogue and normative distance, and regional influence and strategic autonomy. The findings affirm that Russia had neither embraced full-scale recognition nor pursued disengagement; instead, it had cultivated a flexible posture rooted in transactional interests, particularly counterterrorism coordination, border security, and regional stability. Russia's engagement was best understood as a pragmatic, realist response to shifting geopolitical currents. Moscow was treating the Taliban as a de facto authority in Kabul but withholding formal recognition, using this ambiguity to maintain leverage while minimizing reputational and legal liabilities. The Kremlin's approach had been shaped by core strategic imperatives: preventing the spillover of jihadist violence into Central Asia, limiting U.S. or NATO re-engagement under the guise of humanitarian missions, and deterring unilateral domination of Afghanistan by other regional powers—especially China and Pakistan. To achieve these aims, Russia has anchored its strategy in multilateral diplomacy, leveraging forums such as the Moscow Format and CSTO to share responsibility and project influence without entanglement. Economically, it has exercised strategic restraint, offering targeted humanitarian aid and limited trade (such as energy exports), while refraining from expansive investments or reconstruction commitments. This calibrated strategy also reflected Moscow's historical memory and cost-benefit calculus, particularly in light of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan (1979–1989). The policy revealed Russia's preference for tactical cooperation over ideological alignment, dialogue without dependency, and security-led diplomacy over normative engagement. It reveals an underlying realist logic: engagement is necessary but conditional, recognition must be earned, and strategic overreach is to be avoided. Looking ahead, the policy outlook suggests that Russia will continue its tactical engagement with the Taliban, focusing on counterterrorism, intelligence-sharing, and border stabilization, especially in light of threats from ISIS-K and other transnational extremist groups. However, formal diplomatic recognition remained unlikely in the absence of significant behavioral changes by the Taliban regarding governance, minority rights, and transnational militancy. Russia seemed likely to maintain its current posture—cooperation without endorsement, influence without occupation, and regional leadership without unilateral commitments. Such a stance not only preserves Moscow's strategic flexibility but also enables it to navigate the complex and competitive geopolitical terrain of post-2021 Afghanistan, while reinforcing its image as a rational, autonomous actor in the Eurasian order. Overall, Russia's Afghan strategy until the recognition of the Taliban in July 2025 exemplified a mature and strategically autonomous regional policy, one that leverages

historical experience, multilateral diplomacy, and realist restraint to navigate one of the world's most volatile regions. It offers important insights for International Relations scholarship on post-hegemonic regionalism, strategic ambiguity, and the recalibration of great power engagement in a multipolar world.

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