

How Russia is reacting to the situation in Afghanistan

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On July 8-9, a three-member delegation of the Taliban (who consider themselves the government of the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) visited Moscow, where they held consultations with the Russian President's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov. The Russian side urged the Taliban to desist from destabilising the post-Soviet states in Central Asia and to negotiate with the authorities in Kabul and representatives of ethnic minorities (the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras) with the aim of forming a transitional coalition government. Russia has promised that once such negotiations begin, it will take steps to remove the Taliban from the UN Security Council list of terrorist organisations (the Taliban was put on it in 2001). While holding their first ever press conference in Moscow, the Taliban delegation provided assurances that their armed units would not cross Afghanistan's borders and gave security guarantees to foreign diplomatic and consular staff. They also promised to fight Islamic State and combat drug production and trafficking. They further declared a willingness to open peace talks with the government and insisted that they would respect human rights within the "framework of Islamic standards and Afghan traditions."

The Taliban delegation's arrival coincided with growing concern in Moscow over the spectacular successes scored by the Taliban against government troops in the wake of the evacuation of the bulk of the US military contingent (approximately 2,500 soldiers) in May and June 2021. (The withdrawal is expected to be completed by the end of August 2021.) Moscow has been alarmed in particular by the Taliban's take-over of Afghanistan's northern districts and of all its borders (except for two border crossings), as well as by signs of growing demoralisation in the ranks of government forces: entire garrisons surrendering without a fight and fled to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The prospect of a relatively quick victory of the Taliban in the civil war and the collapse of state structures in Afghanistan have raised concerns in Russia about the possible destabilisation of Central Asian countries as a result of a wave of refugees, possible border violations by Taliban forces, and the activation in the region of other radical Islamic groups, including those linked to the former Islamic State.

Commentary

- Russia established contacts with the Taliban back in 2014 in the context of a crisis in relations with the United States and the assumption of power in Kabul by President Ashraf Ghani, who, unlike his predecessor Hamid Karzai, held Moscow at arm's length and consequently was perceived by it as an advocate of close ties with the United States.

In November 2018, for the first time, a Taliban delegation was invited to the Russian capital to attend a meeting of the so-called Moscow Format. The Kremlin's intention was to create an international framework for intra-Afghan dialogue that would lead to a political solution to the conflict. Since then, Taliban delegations have visited Moscow several times. The last such visit in the framework of bilateral consultations took place in January 2021. The contacts with the Taliban have since 2016 been accompanied by accusations, voiced by both the US military and Afghan politicians, that Russia is supplying them with weapons. Russian diplomacy has always strongly denied such allegations.

- Moscow has preached for years that the only way to end the Afghan conflict is through a political compromise among Afghans and after the evacuation of foreign military contingents. According to the Russian government, such an agreement required a favourable international context in the form of cooperation between regional players and the US. Since 2018 Russia has undertaken a number of diplomatic initiatives to create these formats – the most important of which was the establishment of the so-called Troika Plus group in 2019, which included the United States, China and Pakistan in addition to Russia. This group held several meetings and adopted a number of documents containing agreed common principles on which the settlement of the Afghan conflict should be based.
- It is difficult to avoid the impression that Russia did not expect that an evacuation of US forces from Afghanistan would so quickly threaten the stability of the Central Asian states. Nevertheless, it still regards the US evacuation, which it has been openly calling for many years, as a strategic gain. Russia had been hoping for protracted fighting between the Taliban and its opponents and an actual division of the country between them. This would open up the possibility of playing off the tensions between different political forces and ethnic groups inside Afghanistan, and of taking advantage of Russia's good relations with all the rival groups (with the exception of Islamic extremists, such as Islamic State).
- The situation in Afghanistan has thus also become a challenge for Russian policy in the region. Russia has taken decisive steps to coordinate military action with Tajikistan. On 17 May, President Vladimir Putin approved a draft agreement to create a joint air defence system with Dushanbe. The signing of the agreement will be the first step towards implementing the concept of integrating the Tajik and Russian armed forces (based on the Russian-Belarusian model). Russia's assumption of control over Tajikistan's air defences will also allow it to expand its control of Afghanistan's airspace. In an effort to speed up the improvement of the Tajik army, the Russian Defence Ministry has begun extensive training for it. This army of 8,800 soldiers is underfinanced (the defence budget is \$174 million), and its armoured forces (37 T-72 and T-62 tanks) are obsolete. Tajikistan also has no real air force (apart from a dozen or so Mi-24 attack helicopters). The weakness of Tajikistan's armed forces is partially compensated by the 201st base of the Russian Armed Forces, located in Dushanbe and Bakhtar. Contrary to its name, this is a combat unit numbering about 7,000 soldiers, equipped with armour, rocket artillery and provided with an air support group (attack helicopters and drones). The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan will accelerate its retrofitting and its reinforcement with a tank

regiment. Once this plan is implemented, it will become a full-fledged division-sized unit.

- A key issue for Russia will be to ensure reasonably effective control of the Tajik-Afghan border. Fears of an influx of migrants as well as radical Islamic militias may result in Russia deciding to send a contingent of the FSB border guards to the frontier. Another challenge for the Russian special services is to eliminate or control drug smuggling. Nor can it be ruled out that Afghan migrants detained in Tajikistan will be allowed to cross Russia's border with European countries.

- The goals of Russian policy in Afghanistan seem to entail:

a) bringing the US withdrawal process from the region to an end. In this regard, Moscow has openly spoken out against the transfer of the US military from Afghanistan to the Central Asian states. However, in doing so, it wanted the withdrawal to be orderly and linked to the intra-Afghan political process;

b) to trigger (genuine, not feigned) political negotiations between the rival Afghan forces and to act as an intermediary in them;

c) to create a regional mechanism for "overseeing" the political process in Afghanistan, in which Russia could play the pivotal role and which would constitute a kind of regional "concert of powers" coordinating their policy towards Afghanistan.

- There are no signs so far that Russia aspires to build a special position for itself in Afghanistan, for example, by creating some kind of "pro-Russian" political camp. In particular, the Kremlin has declared that it rules out any military intervention on Afghan territory. It is also very cautious about providing military assistance to the present Afghan government (the only form of support existing at the moment is the training of Ministry of Internal Affairs personnel). It is to be expected, however, that Moscow will use the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan to exert political pressure on the Central Asian states and to further strengthen its military presence in the region.