

A 'new' opening: Russia officially recognises the Taliban regime

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On 3 July, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs accepted the credentials of the Taliban government's representative in Moscow. With this act, Russia became the first country in the world to officially recognise the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, established in 2021 following the Taliban's takeover. In April, Russia's Supreme Court removed the Taliban from the federal list of terrorist organisations, lifting a designation that had been in place since 2003. Subsequently, Russia became the third country, after China and the United Arab Emirates, to upgrade the status of the Taliban's representation in Moscow.

The formal recognition of the Taliban government does not signify a substantial qualitative shift in Russian–Afghan relations. The Kremlin will seek to deepen its already well-established relationship with the new regime in Kabul, in order to maximise the strategic, political, and economic benefits. Closer ties with the Taliban could provide Russia with leverage in its confrontation with the West, enhance domestic security in the context of counter-terrorism, and expand access to the Afghan market for Russian businesses.

Commentary

- **Russia's recognition of the Taliban regime merely formalises an existing reality.** Indeed, the Kremlin maintained cordial relations with the movement even prior to its seizure of power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Russia retained its ambassador in Kabul, and both sides engaged in high-level bilateral meetings. In addition, representatives of the new Afghan regime participated in official events hosted by Russia, including the St Petersburg International Economic Forum. The discussion surrounding the removal of the Taliban from the list of terrorist organisations, a designation that had prevented any formal deepening of bilateral ties, began as early as 2020. Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Federal Security Service (FSB), which maintains the list, recommended the move to the Kremlin. The Prosecutor General's Office submitted a formal request to Russia's Supreme Court.
- **Strengthening Taliban rule lies in the Kremlin's strategic interest.** The presence of an Islamist, anti-Western regime in Kabul enables Russia to involve Afghanistan in the activities of an informal bloc opposed to the United States and its allies. This cooperation is also desirable in light of the growing presence in Russia of the terrorist organisation Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISIS-K; see *'Islamists and the 'Ukrainian trace'. The Moscow concert hall terrorist attack'*), which the Taliban has been actively combatting, as

well as the new Afghan government's harsh crackdown on narcotics production. Although the Kremlin has publicly called for respect for human rights in Afghanistan and the formation of a government representing all ethnic groups, such statements serve as political cover for deepening ties with the Taliban and will not adversely affect relations between the two sides.

- **Russia hopes to secure economic concessions from the Taliban.** The Kremlin is primarily interested in access to Afghanistan's mining and energy sectors, as well as investments in agriculture and participation in infrastructure projects. Discussions have taken place regarding the reconstruction of the Salang Tunnel, a vital transport artery connecting Central and South Asia originally built by Soviet specialists. In 2024, bilateral trade reached an estimated \$300 million, with an extreme imbalance in Russia's favour. The two sides have also discussed the possibility of settling transactions in national currencies. Russian humanitarian aid to Afghanistan remains limited. Between 2022 and 2024, it reached approximately 50,000 people, while the number of those in need is estimated at over 20 million. The Kremlin's openness to labour migration is similarly symbolic. Only around 100 Afghans are officially employed in Russia; both sides have agreed to raise this number by 1,000. Given Russia's increasingly restrictive migration policy, a significant influx of Afghan workers appears unlikely. However, the Kremlin may intensify its use of Afghan migrants as a means of exerting migratory pressure on the European Union's borders.