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Issue Brief

The Taliban-Russia Re-Connect

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S*ummary*

Russia's initiative to accept credentials of the new Afghan ambassador is significant, as the Taliban government is a descendant of the mujahedin forces, which fought the Soviets for years and forced them out of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

On 16 January 2026, President Vladimir Putin accepted the credentials of Gul Hassan Hasan, appointed by the Taliban government as Afghanistan’s ambassador to Russia. This marked the culmination of Russia’s paced rapprochement with the Taliban, a process that began soon after the US forces withdrew and the Taliban assumed power. In July 2025, Russia became the first country to recognise the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, paving the way for expanded bilateral ties and cooperation. The Russian foreign ministry then observed that the change in diplomatic status would broaden bilateral cooperation in security, counter-terrorism and the fight against drug crime. It added that the move will also enhance trade interactions “with a focus on projects in energy, transport, agriculture, and infrastructure”.¹

Earlier in April 2025, Russia’s Supreme Court had delisted the Taliban from its list of terrorist organisations, having proscribed the group in the early years of the War on Terror.² The Russian government introduced a bill in its legislature to authorise its courts to write off the Taliban’s proscription. This was after President Putin called the Taliban one of Russia’s “allies in the fight against terrorism”.³

How Does This Matter?

Russia’s recognition is significant, given that countries such as China, which has maintained diplomatic ties with the Taliban since 2023, have yet to confer formal recognition on the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. Notably, China welcomed Russia’s recognition of the Taliban government. Similarly, Pakistan, which claimed to have facilitated the Taliban’s return in 2021, did not do so until its relations with the group began to sour. This is important, as both China and Pakistan (until a certain point) effectively supported the Taliban when everyone ostracised them. Even New Delhi’s diplomatic breakthrough was achieved without formal recognition.

Russia’s initiative to accept credentials from the Taliban government is also significant, as the group is a descendant of the mujahedin forces, which fought the Soviets for years and forced them out of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The Taliban fought to eradicate residual communist forces in Afghanistan even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Notably, the Taliban 1.0 came to power after eliminating

¹ [“On the Presentation of Copies of Credentials by the Ambassador of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to the Russian Federation G.H. Hassan”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 3 July 2025.

² [“Russia Removes Afghan Taliban From List of Banned Terrorist Groups”](#), *Reuters*, 17 April 2025.

³ [“Russian Lawmakers Pass Bill Paving Way for Taliban’s Removal From Terrorist List”](#), *The Moscow Times*, 17 December 2024.

former president Mohammed Najibullah, a known Soviet protégé. At one point, the Russians alleged that Taliban 1.0 had supported the Chechen secessionists.⁴

The Russia–Taliban ties have evolved due to multiple factors concerning security, economics and broader geopolitics. Historically, Russia has had an abiding strategic interest in Afghanistan, given that the two states were bound by geography till 1991. Afghanistan shared a critical 1,300 km-long land border with the Soviet Union and remained of great strategic value to the Soviet Union. This border was inherited from a British-Russian understanding to demarcate spheres of influence while maintaining Afghanistan as a buffer territory.

Cold War Descent

For decades, Moscow had a political foothold in Afghanistan. Even before the formal military intervention, Afghanistan was already witnessing a perpetual turf war between the pro- and anti-communist factions. Afghanistan remained more amenable to the Soviet Union than to the United States, which chose Pakistan as an ally. Russian aid proved helpful in maintaining influence over successive Afghan governments. The Saur Revolution of 1978, led by the pro-Soviet PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan), together with a series of rapid political coups and assassinations, had a precipitating impact, resulting in the Soviet army's arrival in Afghanistan in December 1979.⁵ Moscow's military action drew upon the Brezhnev doctrine, which propounded the Soviet Union's "right to intervene in other socialist countries if it perceived their policies to be harmful to the global socialist movement".⁶

There was already seething anger over the imposition of a Soviet-style reform and governance model in Afghanistan.⁷ The military intervention stoked trepidation, seen as a direct threat to ideology and faith. Such sentiments fuelled the mujahideen resistance, which received adequate support from the US–Pakistan alliance. The military intervention and its later confrontation with the mujahideen resistance, ideologically fuelled and motivated by their jihad to save religion and culture from atheist communists, bred in Pakistan and funded by the US, made Afghanistan the

⁴ [“Russia’s Chechnya Conflict: Developments in 2002-2003”](#), CRS Report for Congress, 16 April 2003, p. 20.

⁵ Jonathan Neale, [“Remembering the Saur Revolution”](#), Jacobin, 15 May 2018.

⁶ Sergei Kovalev, [“Brezhnev Doctrine”](#), *The International Obligations of Socialist Countries*, 25 September 1968.

⁷ Anil Çiçek, [“The Quicksand of Afghanistan: The Impact of the Afghanistan War on the Breakup of the Soviet Union”](#), *International Journal of Russian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2015, p. 120.

principal pivot of the Cold War proxy confrontations between the US and the Soviet Union. The hostilities between the Red Army and the mujahideen, which lasted over a decade, ended with Soviet withdrawal, and its eventual disintegration marked the end of the Cold War.

Even after its disintegration, Russia exercised some residual influence. Following Najibullah’s fall in 1992, Russia extended support to Burhanuddin Rabbani, a former member of the Mujahedin Front, as the President of Afghanistan.⁸ Afterwards, Russia turned its focus towards the Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban force.⁹

Rapprochement amid the War on Terror

The ouster of Taliban 1.0 and some early gains in the War on Terror allowed Russia to resurrect its diminishing niche in Afghanistan. Russia also renewed its defence ties with Kabul, after which it provided military equipment worth US\$ 30 million between 2002 and 2005.¹⁰ Russia projected a constructive, supportive role towards the US war efforts. During the war, Russia provided access to alternative supply routes through its territory and airspace in support of the US’s war in Afghanistan.

However, after 2014, as the debate over an imminent US withdrawal gained momentum, President Barack Obama announced a significant troop reduction in Afghanistan, anticipating that the mission would end by 2016.¹¹ Russia began diversifying and broadening its approach. Significantly, the Hamid Karzai government stood behind the Russian annexation of Crimea despite the US’s disapproval of the same.¹²

By this time, the Taliban was already beginning to regain its foothold in the country. The ascent of the Taliban against a fledgling Afghan government and a perceptible US haste to leave was an impetus for Russia to engage with a group it earlier prohibited. Russia started to figure in the reconciliation efforts concerning Afghanistan, collaborating with countries in Afghanistan’s contiguity—China, Pakistan and Iran, amongst others. This entailed that Russia was now also brokering negotiations between the then-belligerent Taliban factions and the Afghan

⁸ [“President Vladimir Putin Addressed the Nation on Television”](#), The Kremlin, 24 September 2001.

⁹ Thomas Withington, [“The Early Anti-Taliban Team”](#), *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November/December 2001, p. 13.

¹⁰ Diana Janse, [“Russian Interests in Afghanistan”](#), SCEEUS Report No. 1, The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, October 2021, p. 4.

¹¹ [“U.S. Troops to Leave Afghanistan by End of 2016”](#), *The New York Times*, 27 May 2014.

¹² [“Breaking With the West, Afghan Leader Supports Russia’s Annexation of Crimea”](#), *The New York Times*, 23 March 2014.

government. Such a cohort comprised states with shared security concerns emanating from Afghanistan’s protracted instability and, therefore, mostly portrayed their collective efforts in this light.

In 2016–17, Russia organised a series of talks with China, Pakistan, Iran and, in the later rounds, Afghanistan.¹³ Russia also engaged with the Afghanistan issue under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s Afghan Contact Group. Interestingly, Afghanistan’s National Security Advisor, Mohammed Atmar, once spoke of Russia’s “significant role” in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table.¹⁴

Similarly, the Moscow Format was unveiled in 2017 as a prominent regional forum for key stakeholders, including India, Pakistan and some Central Asian republics. The Moscow Format Consultations, which now host representatives of the Taliban government, have held annual meetings to discuss Afghanistan’s myriad issues and have issued comprehensive statements outlining the desired goals for the country.

It is interesting to note that as Afghanistan approached the cusp of the US withdrawal, Moscow convened a March 2021 meeting with China, Pakistan, and the US’s Special Envoy on Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad. A statement issued thereafter urged “to hold talks and reach a peace agreement that will end more than four decades of war”.¹⁵ As noted, the War on Terror saw a resurgence of Russian interest in Afghanistan. However, in this phase, Moscow shifted from its previous interventionist and assertive postures to a focus on dialogue and negotiations centred on peace in the war-torn country.

Outreach Post-2021

By the time of the US–NATO withdrawal, Russia had developed considerable relations with the Taliban. The Americans had witnessed the Soviet forces withdraw in the late 1980s. In 2021, the Russian embassy remained in Kabul even as most diplomatic missions closed. Over the years, the Russian government re-acquainted itself with the Taliban on multilateral platforms. The Taliban were also invited to participate in an event hosted by Moscow in October 2021, immediately after the G-20 summit, which discussed the country's status.¹⁶

¹³ Julia Gurganus, “[Russia’s Afghanistan Strategy](#)”, *Foreign Affairs*, 2 January 2018.

¹⁴ Henry Meyer, “[Now Putin Is Being Asked to Bring Peace to Afghanistan](#)”, *Bloomberg*, 23 November 2017.

¹⁵ Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber and Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, “[U.S. joined by Russia, China, Pakistan in Call For Afghan Ceasefire](#)”, *Reuters*, 18 March 2021.

¹⁶ “[Russia Invites Taliban to Afghanistan Conference in Moscow](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 7 October 2021.

Later, amidst the unfolding hostilities in the Ukraine war, the Taliban government signed an agreement to purchase oil and wheat from Russia.¹⁷ Significantly, this was a period when the Russian economy was under strain from Western sanctions. Although Afghanistan’s cooperation on counter-terrorism had long been a recurring topic at multilateral forums on Afghanistan, the Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow in March 2024 made the issue tangible. Within months of the attack, Russia announced it was working to delist the Taliban as a terrorist organisation.¹⁸ After delisting, Russia held its first official talks with the Taliban government in October 2025, during which Afghanistan’s foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, described the Russian recognition as “a significant and historic milestone in the advancement of bilateral relations”.¹⁹

Broadly, Russia’s increased interactions with the Taliban since 2021 align with China’s approach—courting the regime, citing counter-terrorism efforts while opposing the imposition of external influence in Afghanistan. More importantly, Russia has urged the international community to accept responsibility for reconstruction and to compensate for damages to infrastructure, etc., during the war.²⁰ The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan after a decades-long US presence provided both Russia and China with the ammunition to call out the futility of US military efforts and the failure of Western efforts to bring stability to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021.

The Road Ahead

Over a decade or so, Russia has taken steps to intensify its engagement with Afghanistan, particularly with the Taliban. It has sought to maintain its influence in a critical region that often attracts external influence and intervention. Russia has had longstanding leverage in Afghanistan, whether political, cultural or military. Initially, the Russian predisposition was primarily driven by geographical and border-related considerations. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia

¹⁷ [“Taliban Signs ‘Preliminary’ Deal with Russia for Oil, Gas, Wheat”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 22 September 2022.

¹⁸ [“Russia has Decided 'at Highest Level' to Remove Taliban from Terrorist List, TASS Reports”](#), *Reuters*, 4 October 2024.

¹⁹ [“Foreign Minister Meets with His Russian Counterpart”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 7 October 2025.

²⁰ [“Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Opening Remarks at the 7th Meeting of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan Moscow”](#), The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 7 October 2025.

retained residual leverage. Russia’s moment came as the US hold on Kabul started to wane, and it was diverted into negotiating a peace deal with the Taliban.

What is being witnessed today is also a manifestation of Russia’s long view of Afghanistan and proof of its ability to adapt to changing geopolitical dynamics. Russia's strategy throughout the War on Terror blended patience with a balancing act, being seen as supporting the US’s War on Terror while, on the one hand, offering alternative supply routes and, on the other, developing ties with groups (then) outside the US purview. The fact remains that Russia re-strategised its role in Afghanistan in a context surcharged by the US’s Asia Pivot and its intensified outreach to manage the China challenge.

As part of this strategy, Russia’s true intentions—whether to nudge the US out of Afghanistan or keep it occupied in the quagmire—could be debated. Or whether it was to cultivate a centre of influence in Afghanistan, simply—be it the Taliban or any other—enabling Moscow to shape the evolving geopolitical balance in a critical backyard? Russia has meanwhile supported calls against the imposition of external will/rule in Afghanistan. For instance, at the end of the Moscow Format Consultation in October 2025, a scathing statement warned against any external military presence in Afghanistan. This was in the context of Trump’s desire to acquire the Bagram air base built by the Soviet Union in the early 1950s.²¹

For a largely ostracised Taliban 2.0, the Russian gesture is significant. It may encourage a few more countries to recognise the Taliban government. Moscow’s approval of the Taliban is substantial for the UN’s future deliberations on Afghanistan, given its P-5 status. Russia’s aegis can serve as a springboard for the Taliban’s diplomatic outreach to the rest of the world. It will add potential to the Taliban’s interactions with Russia’s strategic partners, such as India and China, making them more conducive and productive.

In terms of practical outputs, the Taliban were already taking advantage of travel benefits and signing trade agreements with Russia. However, in a polarised global context, where most of the world, particularly the West, is infuriated with Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the tangible concrete returns from Moscow’s acknowledgement remain to be seen in the times to come. Confrontation with the West has also given Russia relative immunity from moral questions concerning human rights and gender disparity in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

²¹ Stephen Quillen and Reuters, [“Regional Powers Signal Objection to US Reclaiming Afghanistan’s Bagram Base”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 8 October 2025.

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