

Why Russia Doesn't Think the Taliban Are Terrorists Anymore

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Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (R) shaking hands with Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Amir Khan Muttaqi during their meeting in Moscow. **Russian Foreign Ministry Press Service**

There are only a handful of places a minister in the Taliban's de facto Afghan government can fly to these days, and Russia is one of them. Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi was invited to Moscow earlier this month to participate in the sixth meeting of the Consultations on Afghanistan hosted by the Russian government.

Known simply as the Moscow Format, the meeting also saw the participation of regional stakeholders including China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Among the issues discussed were regional and global security concerns, the development of economic and trade opportunities, and humanitarian support for Afghanistan.

The Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021 and their government is yet to receive official

recognition by any country. But despite lacking legitimacy, the insurgent group has managed to gather allies in the region. Earlier this year, Beijing became the first government to officially accept diplomatic credentials from a Taliban-appointed envoy. They were soon followed by the UAE and, more recently, Uzbekistan, just days after the Moscow format.

While much of the meeting took place behind closed doors, by all accounts, it was a diplomatic success for the Taliban. For one, the Russian government announced that a decision had been “taken at the highest level” to remove the Taliban from the national list of terrorist organizations. “The decision needs to be followed up with various legal procedures in order to make it a reality,” Zamir Kabulov, Russia’s special representative on Afghanistan, said during the conference.

Speaking at a different event the same day, Alexander Bortnikov, director of the FSB, justified the move as an effort to work with the Taliban to combat the influence of the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) in the region.

ISKP is the regional branch of the dreaded Islamic State and has been reportedly expanding its presence in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover. The group claimed responsibility for the Crocus City Hall attack near Moscow, in March, which resulted in 145 civilian deaths.

Kabulov also discussed the possibility of the Taliban being invited to the next BRICS meeting scheduled later this month in Russia. It was reported last month, Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban’s deputy prime minister, sent a letter to Yuri Ushakov requesting to be invited to the meeting. However, Kabulov said, such an invitation “can only be made with the agreement of all its members.”

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Meanwhile, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also called on the West to lift its sanctions against the Taliban. The extremist nature of the Taliban regime has forced Afghanistan into isolation, with international agencies withdrawing aid and governments imposing sanctions. This has triggered massive, widespread poverty in the country, with [nearly 24 million people](#) – more than half the population – needing humanitarian assistance in 2024.

While it is unlikely that we will see the Taliban at the BRICS meeting this year, these gestures from the Russian government hint at its growing affinity with the terrorist group.

On one hand, there is pragmatism in maintaining an open channel with the group that controls the volatile nation. Direct negotiations with the Taliban can ensure some control in managing security, especially for the regional stakeholders.

The cross-border movement of insurgents and narcotics originating from Afghanistan remains a major concern for all countries in the neighborhood. The country’s dramatic geography provides a safe haven to terrorist groups, and several international agencies have already raised concerns that organizations like Al Qaeda, ISKP and others are mobilizing international fighters in Afghanistan.

According to a report by the United Nations Security Council, members observed a “high concentration” of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, with the “greatest threat” posed by the ISKP. Incidentally, ISKP attack inside Afghanistan also targeted Russian and Chinese embassies in Kabul, in 2022.

Meanwhile, the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan has left a vacuum not only of political power, but also across the economy. Countries like China have already made inroads into Afghanistan through major investments, including in mining and oil extraction projects.

Russia, too, has significant trade with the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, believed to be close to [\\$1 billion](#) in 2023, and has ambitions to expand its influence, particularly by developing erstwhile Silk Road trade routes to South Asia. In such a scenario, any regional engagement with the Taliban could provide an element of stability to existing and potential investments.

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However, any diplomatic engagement with the Taliban comes at the cost of legitimizing the extremist group and its actions.

Since taking over, the Taliban have also imposed severe restrictions on women’s freedoms including a ban on higher education, employment and participation in public and political realms. Their rule has also reversed decades of social and economic growth, with an increase in persecution of minorities, repression of media and civil society and stifling of free speech.

While stakeholders at Moscow Format did advocate for the protection of basic rights of “women, girls and all ethnic groups,” they did not set out any ways to hold the group accountable. If anything, the Moscow meeting set a very low bar for how to engage with the Taliban.

The absence of any members of the Afghan political opposition, civil society, women’s groups and the media at the meeting only empowered the Taliban. The joint statement issued at the end of the meeting also failed to put in place any measures to seek responsibility on key issues, including security, trade or human rights.

However, the press statements and photo-ops that followed instead presented the Taliban as allies in the fight against terrorist threats in the region. Ironically, not that long ago, the Taliban was the terrorist threat that countries were fighting.

Russia, much like the Taliban, has been shunned and sanctioned in the West for its invasion of Ukraine. The Moscow Format allows the Russian government to exert some influence in the region, presenting itself as a prominent geopolitical player. Russia also used the platform to subtly mobilize against the U.S. interest in Afghanistan.

Incidentally, the Taliban emerged from the U.S.-backed Mujahideen movement to fight the Soviets in the 1980s. The growing affinity between the Taliban and Russia begs the question if new proxies are being formed in the region.

On their part, the Taliban are all too glad to exploit global rivalries for personal gains. A

platform like the Moscow Format provided the otherwise isolated group an opportunity to seek some form of diplomatic recognition, if only from non-western powers. However, it remains to be seen who benefits more from control over the land historically known as the “graveyard of empires.”

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