

## FROM PARIAHS TO PARTNERS? RUSSIA'S CRITICAL RE-EVALUATION OF THE TALIBAN

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**In a significant shift that captures the complex interplay of geopolitics and the ever-evolving landscape of international relations, Russia is reportedly contemplating the removal of the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations, as revealed in a recent TASS report.<sup>1</sup>**

This potentially transformative development marks a major departure from Moscow's longstanding position and underscores Russia's strategic re-evaluation of its role and interests in the Afghan quagmire.

While this move could recalibrate regional dynamics and offer a new paradigm for engagement in Afghanistan, it harbours a profound caveat: the necessity for Moscow to proceed with circumspection.

Hastily altering the Taliban's designation without thorough consideration of regional and extra-regional stakeholders' apprehensions could unravel precarious balances, casting long shadows over prospects for regional and international peace and security. This caution was emphasized by the Russian Defence Minister, who recently stated that Afghanistan remains a significant source of instability in the region, highlighting the complex security challenges Russia faces in its engagement

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<sup>1</sup> "Russian ministries propose to Putin to remove Taliban from terrorist list — envoy", TASS Russian News Agency, published on May 27, 2024.  
<https://tass.com/politics/1793853>

with the Taliban.<sup>2</sup> Such a precipitate move risks removing a critical lever of pressure essential for persuading the Taliban to fulfil its promises made to the international community in 2020 (Doha Accord<sup>3</sup>).

Given commitments made concerning the containment of international terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, underscored by the presence of groups like ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province) and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the maintenance of this pressure is indispensable.

Russia's possible strategic recalibration regarding the Taliban's status intertwines strategic, political, economic, and security imperatives. Strategically, Russia acknowledges the Taliban's ascendance as an incontrovertible reality within Afghanistan's power vacuum, evident in its absence of opposition to the group's takeover in 2021. This acknowledgment is a clear nod to realpolitik, recognizing that without a viable alternative, engagement is not only pragmatic but necessary for influence in Afghanistan's future trajectory.

Russia's engagement with the Taliban extends beyond diplomatic dialogues, reflecting a nuanced strategy aimed at fostering growing ties that are pivotal for the region's stability. Examples include hosting a series of meetings with Taliban representatives in Moscow<sup>4,5</sup>, which served as platforms for the Taliban to present their views to the international community, and highlighted Russia's role as a mediator in the Afghan peace process. Additionally, Russia has explored various areas of potential cooperation with the Taliban, such as counter-narcotics efforts and regional security initiatives, recognizing the Taliban's de facto control over Afghanistan.

Moreover, according to a latest media report by DW<sup>6</sup>, a Taliban government delegation will be taking part in the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (Russia flagship annual economic forum) this year. A Taliban delegation also participated in this forum in 2022 as well. These actions

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<sup>2</sup> "Afghanistan source of instability says Russian Defence Minister", Afghanistan International, published on May 31, 2024.

<https://www.afintl.com/en/202405314053>

<sup>3</sup> "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the United States of America", U.S. Department of State, published on February 29, 2020.

<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> "Regional powers back aid for Afghanistan as Russia hosts Taliban", Aljazeera, published on October 20, 2021.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/20/russia-hosts-taliban-for-talks-but-warns-no-recognition-for-now>

<sup>5</sup> "Russia Hosts Taliban Talks as It Seeks Regional Influence", The Moscow Times, published on September 29, 2023.

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/09/29/russia-hosts-taliban-talks-as-it-seeks-regional-influence-a82611>

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Bushuev, "Russia rebuilding ties with the Taliban", DW, published on June 6, 2024.

<https://www.dw.com/en/russia-rebuilding-ties-with-the-taliban/a-69277920>

signify a pragmatic approach by Russia, aiming to stabilize the region through engagement rather than isolation.

Economically, Russia's approach seems driven by a nuanced understanding of its economic engagements, primarily aiming to support Afghanistan's stability rather than seeking extensive economic gains. This support is crucial for ensuring Afghanistan remains economically viable, preventing internal turmoil from spilling over into the Central Asian Republics — regions Russia considers its soft underbelly due to their geographical proximity and historical ties. Thus, its economic strategy is rooted in a pragmatic desire to maintain regional stability, safeguarding against the ripple effects of Afghanistan's potential collapse on its neighbouring states and, by extension, on Russia itself.

On the security front, the March 22, 2024, terrorist attack in Crocus City Hall in Moscow<sup>7</sup>, claimed by ISKP, serves as a stark reminder of the transnational terrorism threat emanating from Afghanistan. This incident underscores the urgent necessity for Russia to engage the Taliban as a pragmatic partner in counterterrorism efforts. The presence of ISKP and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan poses a direct challenge to regional stability and Russian national security, making cooperation with the Taliban not just a strategic choice but a security imperative.

In navigating the complexities of revising the Taliban's terrorist designation, Russia would do well to adopt a multifaceted and cautious strategy guided by key policy recommendations that prioritize regional security and diplomatic engagement. Engagement in comprehensive dialogues with international and regional stakeholders, including pivotal neighbours such as Pakistan and Iran, is crucial. A significant meeting of regional intelligence heads in Pakistan in 2021<sup>8</sup>, attended by representatives from key regional players including Russia, underscored the importance of collaborative intelligence and security efforts in countering the threats posed by terrorist groups operating within and from Afghanistan. Such forums provide a critical avenue for Russia to share insights, align strategies, and enhance cooperation with neighbouring countries, particularly in intelligence sharing and counterterrorism efforts.

Furthermore, Russia should condition any modification of the Taliban's status on the group's verifiable commitment to combating terrorism and upholding international human rights norms.

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<sup>7</sup> Gvosdev, Hamilton, Wasielewski, "Crocus City Hall Concert Attack", Foreign Policy Research Institute, published on March 25, 2024.

<https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/03/crocus-city-hall-concert-attack/>

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Ishtiaq, "Pakistan hosts meeting of regional intelligence chiefs to discuss Afghanistan – media", Arab News, published on September 12, 2021.

<https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1927296/pakistan>

Leveraging its engagement, Russia has the opportunity to press for these commitments, establishing clear benchmarks for the Taliban's actions against terrorism, including a crackdown on groups like ISKP and TTP. Economically, Russia's support should aim not only at aiding Afghanistan's survival amidst Western sanctions but also at fostering infrastructure and development projects that contribute to the wider region's stability. Such investments should be made contingent on the Taliban's progress towards security, peace, and human rights.

Additionally, Russia's strategy should include bolstering defences against terrorism's spill over effects in collaboration with Central Asian states, Pakistan, and Iran to safeguard regional stability. Special attention to Pakistan's security concerns, given its strategic importance and vulnerability to attacks from Afghan-based terrorist groups, is imperative.

In conclusion, the considerations and recommendations laid out underscore the delicate balancing act Russia faces in potentially revising the Taliban's designation. This pivotal moment in international diplomacy presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Russia to redefine its role in the Afghan context and, by extension, in the broader geopolitical landscape. The path forward demands a strategy that balances the pragmatic need for engagement with the Taliban against the imperative to uphold international security and human rights norms. By prioritizing comprehensive dialogue, regional cooperation, and conditional engagement, Russia has the opportunity to contribute significantly to a stable and secure Afghanistan, mitigating the risks of regional spill over and fostering a landscape conducive to peace and development. The stakes are high and the outcomes uncertain, but with careful navigation, Russia can help steer the region towards a future marked by stability rather than strife, acting not just in its national interest but also in the service of regional and global peace.