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The enemy of my enemy...

Russia is keen to cooperate with anyone with anti-Western policies – including the Taliban – just to claim that it's not alone with its sentiment

The Taliban's leaders have regularly visited Russia, despite being on the Kremlin's list of banned terrorist organisations. Ties between Moscow and the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' have further deepened since February 2022, when Russia launched its large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Strong anti-American sentiments in both Kabul and Moscow offer commonalities. In economic terms, however, Russia's local influence is limited and doesn't compare with that of major regional players such as Pakistan or China.

During the first period of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, Russian officials were highly critical of the radical Islamist regime. The Kremlin was particularly incensed by the Taliban's recognition of Chechnya's declaration of independence, when a bloody conflict was still raging at the Russian Federation's southern tip. This was a key factor in the decision of its then-young president, Vladimir Putin, to back the US-led alliance's military operation against the Taliban.

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Since then, however, two decades have passed, and the world has changed. When the Taliban retook Kabul without resistance on 15 August 2021, Western states' ambassadors scrambled to get their staff out and hastily burned confidential documents, while Russia's embassy in Afghanistan remained unaffected and no one needed evacuating.

Just two days after the fall of Kabul, Russian Ambassador Dmitry Zhirnov became the first foreign diplomat to publicly meet with the Taliban. At the same time, the Russian embassy, already making advances to the Taliban, put out a message describing the overthrown Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's flight as 'disgraceful', accusing him of fleeing Kabul with cars full of cash. By the time the Taliban marched triumphantly into the capital, Moscow had already established close

contacts with the radical Islamist group. Even before that, 'Moscow format' talks had been taking place in the Russian capital between representatives of the former republic and the new emirate. These talks continue today, albeit without the previous administration's participation.

A presence with a complicated history

Following the withdrawal of Western troops, the Taliban spread the narrative that Afghanistan had overcome a 20-year-long US occupation. At a time when relations between Russia and the US were already steadily worsening, this helped to strengthen Moscow's perception despite the Soviet Union's – the Russian Federation's predecessor – military presence in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, which was conveniently forgotten.

In the second half of the 20th century, the USSR was the primary foreign actor in the country. Between the 1950s and 1980s, the Soviets participated in the development of 130 Afghan industry and infrastructure projects – from airports to irrigation systems. Even now, rusting equipment and cars that evoke bygone Eastern Bloc years can often be found on Kabul's streets, while Russian is still widely spoken among older Afghans.

In terms of soft power, Russia has a limited local presence in Afghanistan.

This heyday of Soviet influence is long gone, however. Today, young Afghans who – faced with high unemployment and an ailing economy – dream of emigrating are more likely to set their sights on the US than Russia, the latter being more a fall-back option. More than that, Russia is by no means an easy option for young Afghans: obtaining student visas entails major bureaucratic effort and reports of drone attacks on the Russian capital are further diminishing Russia's appeal for war-weary emigrants. Even in terms of soft power, Russia has a limited local presence in Afghanistan. There are no Russian-led education programmes or humanitarian aid schemes, whereas Turkey, for instance, supports a network of high schools and other school types.

From an economic perspective, Russia's local presence is similarly limited; figures for the current year from the national statistics agency NSIA put Russia eighth in terms of trade volume, with $289 million, far

behind Iran (1.4 bn), China (1.2 bn) and Pakistan (1.2 bn). According to the World Bank, the Afghan economy has contracted by some 35 per cent over the past two years and large parts of its population are threatened by famine, while the UN reports that two-thirds of Afghans live below the poverty line.

Against this backdrop, the Taliban has invested much hope in commodity imports from Russia. In September 2022, Moscow and Kabul signed a major trade agreement under which Russia will supply around one million tonnes of petrol per year, the same quantity of diesel, as well as half a million tonnes of liquid natural gas. In addition, Afghanistan is set to receive two million tonnes of wheat per year. All these goods are likely to be transported by road and rail, and the Taliban claim to be getting them at a discount compared to global market prices. Moscow has confirmed the deal but has not commented on details.

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In February 2023, the Russian ambassador announced an agreement between Russia and the Taliban on the construction of a thermal power station in the north of the country. He also stated that Russian pipe manufacturers would be involved in the Afghan section of the new gas pipeline set to run from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India. So far though, these plans exist only on paper and there has been no word yet on their actual implementation.

For the Kremlin, developing relations with the Taliban is evidently a priority. It's no coincidence that Russia is one of just a few countries to have granted accreditation to a Taliban diplomat – the new *chargé d'affaires* at the Afghan embassy in Moscow (though the flag of the now defunct Islamic Republic continues to fly atop the embassy building). The Russian government is keen to cooperate with anyone openly pursuing anti-Western policies, be it Iran, North Korea or indeed the Taliban. Such ties allow Moscow to demonstrate that it's not alone with its anti-Western narrative, regardless of how extensive any economic cooperation proves to be.

The Taliban's next Russia trip has already been scheduled: on 29 September 2023, representatives of the group will travel to Kazan to take part in an Afghanistan conference involving various countries. This helps the Kremlin to counter perceptions that Russia is isolated, demonstrating its ability to attract foreign partners. Whether it is also serious about wanting to tackle the severe problems facing Afghan society, however, is doubtful.



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