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Why Russia Is Hedging Its Bets in Afghanistan

Moscow doesn't see the current Afghan government as autonomous, and is trying to strike a balance between all the different forces at play.

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Nozim Kalandarov / TASS

It's been a year since the United States and the Taliban reached their historic agreement on bringing peace to Afghanistan, but as expected, it has not led to any rapid results. Talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government have been taking place in the Qatari capital Doha since last September, but the two sides have still not even managed to agree on the agenda.

The more time passes, the clearer it becomes that the main point of the agreement — the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan within fourteen months of its signing — won't

be achieved. The United States has reduced its contingent from 8,600 troops to 2,500, but has made it clear that it does not intend to withdraw the rest before May unless some miraculous solution is found to all the problems. The German government, which has the second largest contingent in Afghanistan, has already approved extending its mission there until 2022.

Everyone understands that the breakdown of the agreement on withdrawing troops will infuriate the Taliban and prompt a new outbreak of violence: Taliban fighters have said so openly. But the final word lies with the new U.S. president, Joe Biden, who intends to revise the deal, though to what extent is not yet known.

The new administration's policy on Afghanistan should become clearer on March 27 at a conference in Istanbul that Washington has called on both the Afghan government and Taliban to attend.

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According to the Associated Press, under the terms of the new U.S. peace agreement due to be signed in Turkey, the Taliban must agree to uphold civil rights and break its ties with Pakistan (believed to be the Taliban's main sponsor), while the Afghan government must accept the Taliban into its ranks as equal partners, and write a new constitution together. In other words, they must do in a couple of months what they have not been able to do over decades.

The Biden administration's motives are clear: it is not pleased to have inherited this problem and isn't sure what to do about it. Against this backdrop, the Afghan sides are starting to look around for other allies, including Russia.

Russia's relationship with Afghanistan is a complex one, burdened with fears for the situation in Central Asia, the standoff with the United States, and the trauma of the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s. Moscow doesn't see the current Afghan government as autonomous, and is trying to strike a balance between all the different forces at play in Afghanistan in order to retain its influence if one of those forces collapses.

The first side to come to Moscow for support ahead of the Istanbul summit was the Taliban at the end of January. Zamir Kabulov, the Foreign Ministry official responsible for Russia's Afghanistan policy, was already unpopular in Kabul, where he has a reputation for appearing to side with the Taliban on the international stage.

Following the Taliban's January visit to Moscow, Kabulov gave an interview in which he said several things that outraged the Afghan government, including that the Taliban were sticking to the peace agreement while the Americans were not, and agreeing with the Taliban's complaints that Afghan government delegates were sabotaging the talks in Doha.

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Relations were smoothed over during an emergency summit in Moscow between the two countries' foreign ministers. Afghanistan's foreign minister, Mohammad Haneef Atmar,

made it clear that it is not acceptable for Moscow to treat Kabul and the Taliban as equal partners.

There is a blueprint for successful cooperation between Russia and the Afghan government. Kabul gladly purchased Russian coronavirus vaccines, and has invited Moscow to participate in a joint Afghan-Uzbek project to build a railway through those two countries and Pakistan.

There may be little enthusiasm among politicians in Kabul for their U.S. ally right now—First Vice President Amrullah Saleh, for example, has said that Kabul thanks the United States for twenty years of financial and military assistance, but will not take orders from Washington. Still, for the United States, Afghanistan remains a partner and an important image project, and accordingly, Washington has an interest in its success. The same cannot be said of Russia, for which a deterioration in the situation in Afghanistan would mean a setback for its biggest geopolitical foe, and give it more ammunition to argue that the United States is failing in its role as global leader.

Despite Kabul's attempts to adhere to a foreign policy that is independent of the United States on issues such as Crimea (former president Hamid Karzai expressed support for Russia's annexation of it) and Iran (U.S. troops stationed in Afghanistan are prohibited from attacking Iranian territory), Moscow views the Afghan government as a U.S. puppet that could at any moment fall to an attack by the Taliban.

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For this reason, Moscow does not intend to put all its eggs in one basket, and believes it is essential to maintain relations first and foremost not with Kabul but with unofficial local leaders, especially in the northern provinces that border with the former Soviet republics. This is why Atta Muhammad Nur, the leader of Afghanistan's Tajik community, has been an important guest at all the Moscow talks on Afghanistan.

On some aspects, the goals of Russia and the United States in Afghanistan align: both countries would like to see the formation of an interim government and an end to the war, after which they can breathe a sigh of relief and move on. This is particularly true of Washington, which is weary of the long and futile campaign it has been waging there since 2001.

In addition, both the United States and Russia have found themselves having to maneuver between the interests of Kabul and the Taliban. That could provide grounds for cooperation: it's no accident that the Americans, who were previously extremely dismissive of Russian efforts in Afghanistan, are now preparing to meet in a new format: with Russia, China, and Pakistan. It's also telling that the March 18 meeting will take place in Moscow, not Doha.

Still, Moscow and Washington's subtexts are very different. The United States may be firm with the Afghan government, but it is still its advocate. Kabul does not trust the Americans entirely, but hopes that they are only holding talks with the Taliban in order to gain influence over them and weaken them.

Russia, meanwhile, is a player whose goals are ultimately unclear, and in any case change with the situation. Moscow is prepared to undermine the authority of the central government by treating regional figures like full-fledged political authorities. Its alliance with unofficial northern leaders — ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks — is more important than with southern leaders (the Taliban), but will still come in useful.

This approach should enable Russia to retain its levers of influence in Afghanistan if the country falls into chaos and the central government collapses. It does, of course, seriously complicate relations with Kabul, which is open to a constructive dialogue with Moscow, despite its dependence on Washington. But being located much closer to Afghanistan's borders than the United States, Russia cannot afford to take the risk of adopting a more one-sided strategy.

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