

Moscow Watches Kabul's Fall With Some Satisfaction, Much Concern

The Kremlin will wait now to see whether the Taliban will fare any better than any of the other powers who have thought they could reshape the country.

By [Mark Galeotti](#)

August 16, 2021



Taliban fighters stand guard along a roadside near the Zanbaq Square in Kabul **Wakil Kohsar / AFP**

A month ago — and, as we have seen, a month is a whole cycle between triumphalism and despair — [I wrote](#) that Moscow was viewing events in Afghanistan with a ‘mix of satisfaction, exasperation and trepidation.’ The sudden collapse of the Kabul regime has heightened all three emotions.

It is not that it is at all unhappy with the sight of the self-described ‘indispensable nation,’ ‘the last superpower’ and, as the Russians see it, the would-be global hegemon reduced to ignominious flight, helicopters lifting diplomats to Kabul airport in an inevitable echo of the

fall of Saigon.

For some, it was simply a geopolitical debacle. The government newspaper *Rossiiskaya gazeta* [framed it](#) as ‘a shameful result for the American ideologues of the fight against terrorism and nation-building.’

Others sought to frame it in wider terms. For example, hawkish Senator Alexei Pushkov [called](#) it ‘a revenge of history, religion and ideology over modernity and globalism’ and ‘the decline of a whole school of thought, a whole system of myths and ideas’ about the ‘end of history’ and the triumph of the Western model.

However, it is striking how far the Russian media and government spokespeople alike have largely been avoiding undue expressions of *schadenfreude*. After all, the prospect of an Afghanistan dominated by the Taliban — banned as a terrorist organisation within Russia — or returned to civil war has serious implications for Moscow. As one comment on a Telegram channel for veterans of the Soviet Afghan war put it ‘Europe and America are far from Afghanistan: but for us, it’s on our doorstep.’

Related article: [Russia to Partially Evacuate Kabul Embassy Staff After Taliban Takeover](#)

The country’s official top exports may be carpets and fruits, but in practice they have for a long time been jihad, opium and refugees. The prospect of all three pouring into Central Asia is both plausible and, for the Kremlin, alarming.

After all, it is not just that from Central Asia they can easily reach Russia, across physical borders and along the cultural channels cut by thousands of migrants and temporary labourers. It is also that Moscow stands as the security guarantor for the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Russian-led regional security body, and as important is the Kremlin’s implicit claim to regional dominance.

Moscow has long been preparing itself for this kind of eventuality. Its 201st Military Base in Tajikistan has been through a period of rearmament, with its 7,000-strong garrisons in Dushanbe and Bokhtar equipped with [Orlan-10 drones and modernised infantry fighting vehicles](#).

Last month, Russia, Tajik and Uzbek troops exercised together in wargames that were as much about signalling a preparedness to respond to any cross-border incursions as anything else. Nonetheless, the threat from radicalisation cannot be stemmed with tanks, and Turkmenistan is feared to be a [particular vulnerability](#).

With the stick, though, the carrot. Moscow has also actively been developing its own diplomatic connections not only with the main Taliban leadership but also with local warlords within and outside the movement.

The activities that some U.S. sources claimed last year were Russian efforts to offer [bounties for dead American soldiers](#) were more likely old-fashioned efforts to buy alliances through cash payments, a practice as familiar to the Soviet KGB in the 1980s as British political officers

in Afghanistan in the nineteenth century.

Related article: [Russia Says Taliban Controls Afghan Borders With Uzbekistan, Tajikistan](#)

The Taliban delegation which [came to Moscow](#) in July reassured the Kremlin that their rise posed no threat, and indeed there are [no current plans to evacuate](#) the Russian embassy in Kabul, which is reportedly now actually being [guarded](#) by Taliban fighters. Zamir Kabulov, the highly-regarded head of the Foreign Ministry's Second Asian Department, has [expressed](#) confidence that a positive relationship will hold: 'I not only hope, I am sure of this.'

Words are cheap, though, and the Taliban clearly had an incentive not to alarm the Kremlin while momentum was so clearly on its side and Kabul in its grasp.

The real test will be what happens now, not least as the Taliban is less monolithic than it may appear. The fight about the Western-backed government provided a unifying force, but now that this war is won, divisions over future policy — and especially as to how hard-line a Sharia regime to impose — as well as all kinds of personal, factional and regional disputes are likely to emerge.

Taking power in Afghanistan has historically been much easier than exercising and holding it. The Kremlin is waiting to see whether the Taliban will fare any better than any of the other powers who have thought they could reshape the country.

Ironically, the Kremlin probably hopes they do.

It would be a brave, foolish and historically tone-deaf leadership that again sent Russian soldiers into Afghanistan, and so the most likely outcome, if the country again lapses into chaos, would be a desperate bid to shore up neighbouring states that are already far from stable and watch anarchy spread along Russia's southern flank. This latest Afghan War may be ending, but the next one may already be starting.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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