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Russia Hosts Taliban Talks as It Seeks Regional Influence

By AFP

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Amir Khan Muttaki, right, foreign minister of Afghanistan's interim Taliban-led government, takes part in the fifth session of the Moscow format consultations on Afghanistan at Kazan City Hall. **Yegor Aleyev / TASS**

Russia hosted Taliban leaders for talks on regional security Friday as it seeks to forge ties with Afghanistan's new rulers and assert itself as a major power in the region.

Since U.S. forces pulled out of Kabul in August 2021, Russia and China have taken advantage of the vacuum, holding talks with the Taliban despite deep ideological and historical rifts.

"For our part, we will continue to develop multifaceted contacts with Afghanistan," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in a written greeting to participants of the talks, held in the city of Kazan.

The Taliban seized control of Afghanistan shortly after U.S. troops left, imposing their strict

interpretation of Sharia law and cracking down on women's rights.

In his comments, Lavrov criticized the U.S. withdrawal as a "complete fiasco" and said he hoped the West would never return to Afghanistan or its neighbors.

"We consider the return of U.S. and NATO military infrastructure to the territory of Afghanistan and its neighboring states to be unacceptable," Lavrov said.

He also said that he hoped Kabul will "do everything to intensify its counter-terrorism and anti-drug efforts," amid security concerns from Moscow.

The Taliban is officially recognized as a "terrorist organization" in Russia, which fought against Islamist rebel militants for much of the 1980s during the Soviet-Afghan War.

Lavrov's comments come days after Uzbekistan, which neighbors Afghanistan, hosted U.S. officials for talks on strengthening military ties.

Uzbekistan allowed U.S. forces to use its Soviet-era "K-2" air base during the early 2000s to launch military operations into Afghanistan, and in 2020 held joint exercises with U.S. troops.

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