

With Afghan Collapse, Moscow Takes Charge in Central Asia

Along with Pakistan and China, Russia has gained broad influence in security matters at the expense of the United States and India.



By **Andrew E. Kramer** and **Anton Troianovski**

Aug. 19, 2021

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — As the Afghan government collapsed this week in Kabul and the United States scrambled to speed up its evacuation effort, hundreds of Russian armored vehicles and artillery pieces were clearly visible hundreds of miles away, on the border with Tajikistan.

They were part of a high-profile military exercise taking place just 12 miles from a Taliban position, and they were there, a Russian general said, to make a point.

“They are all visible,” said Gen. Anatoly Sidorov, commander of the forces involved in the exercise. “They are not hiding.”

It will now be Russia, the exercises signaled, that will be shielding Central Asia from potential violence next door.

In the long post-Soviet jostling for power and influence in Central Asia sometimes called the new Great Game, an ever more dominant player has emerged from the chaos and confusion of Afghanistan: Russia, at least in security affairs.

“I wouldn’t say a wounded animal,” the Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, said on Tuesday of the withdrawal of NATO and the U.S. forces from Afghanistan. “But this is a group of countries that in a very painful and difficult way is giving up on the positions in the world they were used to for many decades.”



The Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, in Moscow last month. With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia is wielding greater influence in Central Asia. Pool photo by Sergei Ilnitsky

The strengthening of Russia's position in Central Asian security matters is part of a broader shift brought about by the Taliban's rise to power. Russia, China and Pakistan all stand to gain influence in regional affairs with the West's withdrawal, while the United States and India stand to lose.

"I'm thinking of this as a post-Western or post-U.S. space now," said Alexander Cooley, director of the Harriman Institute at Columbia University, and an authority on Central Asia. "It's a region transforming itself without the United States."

And largely to Russia's benefit.

For Moscow, the chaotic American withdrawal, while reminiscent of Russia's humiliating 1989 retreat from Afghanistan after its disastrous 10-year intervention, was a propaganda victory on a global scale.

From Latin America to Eastern Europe, Russia has fought for influence by insisting that the United States cannot be trusted. Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of Russia's Security Council, warned that America's friends in Ukraine could soon also be disappointed.

"The country is headed toward collapse, and the White House at a certain moment won't even remember about its supporters in Kyiv," Mr. Patrushev said in an interview published on Thursday.

The rapid fall of President Ashraf Ghani's government was also a vindication of Russia's yearslong strategy of building a diplomatic relationship with the Taliban. As Western diplomats scrambled to flee Kabul this week, Russian officials stayed put, with the Taliban guaranteeing the security of the Russian Embassy.

"They made a good impression on us," Russia's ambassador in Kabul, Dmitri Zhirnov, said of his embassy's new Taliban guards on Russian state television this week. "They're decent guys, well armed."

At Russia's most recent round of talks with the Taliban in Moscow, in July, the group pledged that its military gains would not be a threat to Russia or its interests. Russia hosted the Taliban for multiple rounds of talks even though the group is officially classified as a banned terrorist organization with Russia, making any association with it a potential crime.

"It's pragmatism — and cynicism and double-think," said Arkady Dubnov, a Russian expert on Central Asia, describing the Russian government's strategy of building ties with the Taliban. "People are locked up in Russia for this kind of cooperation with a terrorist organization."

Russia's military exercises on the border represented another side of its strategy, a show of force to demonstrate its willingness to punish the Taliban if they should step out of line. "You can talk to the Taliban but you also need to show them a fist," said Daniel Kiselyov, editor of Fergana, a Russian-language outlet focused on Central Asia.

Updates on Afghanistan Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Beyond Afghanistan, Russia still faces stiff competition from China's debt and infrastructure diplomacy in Central Asia, a central thoroughfare of Beijing's Belt and Road initiative. And the American oil companies Chevron and Exxon have been pumping crude in Kazakhstan for years. On Tuesday, China and Tajikistan announced a joint border-patrol exercise.

But Russia's security presence is predominant. The sprawling military footprint the U.S. established in the former Soviet states of Central Asia to facilitate the invasion of Afghanistan has all but disappeared.

As Edil Baisalov, the Kyrgyz ambassador to Britain, put it succinctly in a telephone interview: "The great hour of America in Central Asia has long since passed."

Huge U.S. military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have long since closed down, along with a major supply line called the Northern Distribution Network that had stretched from as far away as the Baltic nations through Russia and Central Asia to northern Afghanistan.

As the U.S. military effort has wound down, so, too, has Washington's political influence. The Biden administration made overtures this summer to four of the five former Soviet Central Asian countries — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan — offering things like aid funding and Covid-19 vaccines in exchange for taking a share of 9,000 Afghan refugees. So far it has found no takers.

Some, like Tajikistan, gladly accepted the money and vaccines while still declining to take the refugees. Today, the Moderna vaccine is available free in government-run medical tents in village bazaars in the mountain region of Badakhshan in Tajikistan, residents say.

But nearby, Russian tanks and armored personnel carriers have been rumbling along the roads, kicking up dust, in an area to which Tajikistan denied the United States access during its military withdrawal.



Russian military helicopters in Tajikistan during the high-profile exercise near the border with Afghanistan this month. Didor Sadulloev/Associated Press

Through the summer, Russia's leaders made clear who was calling the shots in regional diplomacy north of Afghanistan, while undercutting the Biden administration's two initiatives in the region, the one on Afghan refugees and another on security aid.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

At a conference in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, in July, Mr. Lavrov said he had discussed with Central Asian leaders the U.S. request to move some American military capabilities to their countries after the pullout. “None of our allies expressed any intention to expose their territories and populations to such risk,” he said.

Underscoring Russia’s growing sway in Afghanistan, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken called Mr. Lavrov on Monday to discuss the evacuation of Americans from Kabul, the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement. Mr. Lavrov, the ministry said, described to Mr. Blinken Russia’s contacts “with representatives of all the main political forces in Afghanistan in the interest of helping to foster stability and rule of law.”



Soviet forces entering Uzbekistan in 1989 in their own ignominious retreat from Afghanistan, after a disastrous, 10-year intervention. Leonid Yakutin/Russian Ministry of Defense, via Associated Press

After the American-backed Afghan government collapsed on Sunday, Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council, the Russian Senate, called in a Facebook post for strengthening a Russian-led military alliance with several Central Asian states, the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

"Russia can quickly restore its position in Central Asia," Andrei Serenko, a reporter specializing in Afghan affairs at *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, said in an interview. "It will put its security umbrella up in place of the disappearing American umbrella."

Not everything is breaking Russia's way in regional security matters. All things being equal, Mr. Dubnov said, Moscow would have been happy for the United States to remain in Afghanistan and for Washington to continue to shoulder the burden of preventing the country from becoming a haven for international terrorist groups. The Kremlin sees the possibility of Islamist extremists and drug traffickers crossing into post-Soviet republics in Central Asia, and from there into Russia, as a serious threat.

"It was of course a great deal for us when the Americans were doing the work of dragging the hotheads out of the fire over there," Mr. Dubnov said.

The fear of a renewed threat was palpable this week at a small museum on Moscow's outskirts dedicated to the Soviet Union's disastrous, decade-long war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Photographs of young men from the neighborhood who lost their lives line a memorial alcove, surrounding a shrine made of a tank track, an artillery box, spent shells and artificial roses.

"You all have left, and everything is on fire again," said the museum's director, Igor Yerin, addressing Americans. "You didn't put out the fire. The fire is only burning hotter."



U.S. soldiers departing for Afghanistan from a since-closed base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan, in 2012. Vyacheslav Oseledko/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

But the deputy head of the Russian Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Dmitri Novikov, responding to E.U. diplomats' concerns about rising Russian influence, said Western nations shouldn't worry about Russia asserting itself in Afghanistan. There will be enough work to go around, he said.

"The painful problems that will exist there for decades to come won't just be an internal problem," he said, "but a problem for the whole world."