



## CONTACT GROUP ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

### The Afghanistan crisis and its implications for Russia-West relations<sup>1</sup>

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Afghanistan is facing multiple crises today, all of which can impact Russia-West relations. From a dire humanitarian disaster and the potential loss of Taliban control to the outflow of Afghan migrants and the future of the drugs trade, the Afghanistan crisis neither starts nor ends with the U.S. withdrawal.

#### The American Perspective

*Myth 1: The U.S. did not accomplish its objectives in Afghanistan.* Operation Enduring Freedom, which marked the public start of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, began in October 2001, in response to al-Qaeda's attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. It was first and foremost a counter-terrorism mission. Al-Qaeda's core leadership has been decimated and since the 2005 London bombings, the West has not suffered any attacks emanating from the region. Al-Qaeda of today is not the al-Qaeda of 9/11. What is more, great progress has been made in intelligence sharing and Western capacity to conduct counterterrorism operations. In this regard, the core objective has been accomplished. When it comes to America's state-building effort in Afghanistan, the U.S. did not succeed. The U.S. paid little attention to the rural areas and the Taliban narratives were sometimes reinforced by the night raids and civilian casualties. However, suggesting that NATO, and the U.S., simply failed ignores the complicated reality of the international community's 20-year involvement in Afghanistan.

*Myth 2: The U.S. could have stayed in Afghanistan.* Contrary to popular belief, the status quo in Afghanistan was not sustainable. Even though there had been no U.S. or ISAF casualties in the 18 months that preceded the pull out, Afghan security forces suffered around 10,000 casualties over the last several years, in addition to 10,000 civilians being killed yearly. In addition, the Afghan army suffered a 30% annual attrition rate annually. At least since 2014, when ISAF's operations concluded,

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<sup>1</sup> This was the Contact Group's 13<sup>th</sup> meeting. The Group met virtually, with an external expert and with the participation of ELN senior and Younger Generation network members to consider the implications of US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. This summary note was prepared by the European Leadership Network secretariat and does not necessarily represent the views of any individual Contact Group member or any member of the European Leadership Network.

the Taliban had steadily been gaining authority, power and influence, especially in the rural Pashtun areas. From the Afghan perspective, the status quo was not sustainable.

*Myth 3: The U.S. decision to withdraw from Afghanistan took everyone by surprise.* In 2011, Osama bin Laden was located and killed. In 2014, ISAF handed over security for the whole of Afghanistan to the Afghan forces. During his four years in office, President Trump was “one tweet away” from declaring a U.S. withdrawal until February 2020, when he set a date for the U.S. to fully withdraw troops by May 2021. Those who regard U.S. withdrawal as unexpected were not paying attention to events that preceded it.

*Myth 4: A top-down political solution could have been achieved in Doha.* The rise of the Taliban, and its eventual victory, was about political rather than military power. It started in rural valleys and towns, and eventually moved up to provincial capitals and urban areas. It was naïve to think that a top-down political compromise, drafted in Doha, would succeed.

### **The European Perspective**

European capitals have been critical of the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, going as far as to question the credibility of the U.S. security guarantee. From the European point of view, the Afghanistan story began to unfold at the height of the “liberal international order”, when it was generally assumed that every country (including Russia and Afghanistan) would eventually mature into a liberal democracy. This explains why a counterterrorism operation morphed into a nation- and state-building exercise in Afghanistan. Some ten years ago, however, the pursuit of foreign policy in the U.S. shifted from strict adherence to values and ideological beliefs to healthy pragmatism. The U.S.-Taliban negotiations are a product of that period. A sense of fatigue with “forever wars” was also felt across Europe. Had the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan taken place two-five years ago, it would have received greater support.

Today, values are back on the foreign policy agenda and there is a tendency to depict great power conflict and competition as one which is fundamentally about values and autocratic versus democratic regimes. It was not until last year that the U.S.-China rivalry started to be regarded as a rift over values, rather than tension over maritime issues or tariffs. Belonging to the liberal democracy camp, European capitals feel a very deep unease with the situation in Afghanistan, women’s rights, and the illusion of democracy that they sowed for 20 years, and struggle with having a principled agenda which is pragmatic at the same time. This not only applies to Afghanistan, but also to the European approach to Syria, China, and Russia, as well as to working with Afghanistan’s neighbors that play a role in Afghanistan’s future.

### **The Russian Perspective**

Having anticipated the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia started developing contacts with the Taliban as soon as the Doha process was launched. However, the speed at which the elected regime imploded and how disorderly the withdrawal was took Moscow by surprise. Russia understands it is not going to be the main “dealmaker” in Afghanistan and that the centre of gravity has shifted from

overseas to regional powers. Even though it is expected that Pakistan will likely have the most influence and impact on developments in Afghanistan, the relations between the Taliban and Pakistan remain very complex. In economic terms, Russia expects China to play the most important role.

Russia is concerned about three issues. First, there is a spillover potential associated with the inflow of refugees and forced migrants, particularly those of Tajik ethnic origin, which constitute the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Second, Russia is concerned about the threat of terrorism posed by fundamentalist groups that are active in Afghanistan, namely ISIS-K and Al Qaeda (rather than the Taliban). The final issue concerns drug trafficking, which increased dramatically over the past few years. In Russia, many believe that the U.S. and its Allies took a very permissive approach to drug production in the country, as it helped keep certain regions stable.

When it comes to immediate challenges, Russia is most concerned about ways to prevent a humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan, how Pakistan and the Taliban will treat other radical fundamentalist groups that are active in Afghanistan, and whether Al Qaeda and ISIS will be able to use the country as a launch pad for international attacks. The lack of a more inclusive government in Kabul constitutes another immediate challenge, particularly when it comes to Tajik-Afghan relations and tensions in the border regions. An indicator of success (or failure) will be the Taliban's ability to retain the new generation of technocrats that it inherited from the previous administration when the borders reopen, and the extent to which the Taliban will be able to interpret the Sharia law in a more liberal and less rigid way.

Overall, it is expected that the Afghanistan crisis will strengthen Russia's ties with its Central Asian neighbors, and that it will require a recalibration of Russia's approach to regional issues. Moscow's support of secular regimes over political Islam will also be brought to question, which may be a game change in some regional conflicts. From the Kremlin's point of view, the issue at stake is less about the juxtaposition of liberal democracies and autocracies than about maintaining order over chaos. It expects the U.S. to take a more assertive approach to some of the regional crises it has been engaged in (including but not limited to Ukraine) to demonstrate the validity of its security guarantee.

## DISCUSSION TAKEAWAYS

- There are significant geopolitical dangers in misreading Afghanistan's lessons. These could be somewhat mitigated by improved collaboration between the U.S., Russia, Europe (and potentially China) on next steps. There is an opportunity to think collectively about how to deal with the **recognition of the Taliban**. At this moment, it seems that only Russia and China talk to the Taliban.
- We know, from the past, that if we try to punish the regime, we will punish the people. To ease humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, it was suggested that **sanctions waiver** be discussed by the five UN Security Council permanent members, and even, in a broader framework, by the G20. In addition to sanctions waiver and assistance programs, cooperation should focus on **technical assistance** and **delivery mechanisms**. If the Taliban does not last, it will likely be replaced by a more fundamentalist regime.

- The **shared experience** of difficulty in Afghanistan (the USSR withdrawal in 1988-1989 and the U.S. withdrawal this year) provides some common ground for Russia and the West to move forward together. Both countries failed in their state-building efforts, which is why Russia did not engage in similar efforts in Syria and Libya.
- There is **common ground** for Russia and the West to collaborate on counter-terrorism, anti-drug trafficking, preventing a humanitarian disaster from unfolding, and on managing Afghan migration. International cooperation and coordination are also needed to block financial flows to ISIS. It is worth overcoming the different US-Europe-Russia pathologies (a backward looking West; European anxieties about the US; Russian (and US) mistrust of political Islam) to collaborate on managing the next Afghanistan crisis.
- With regard to **counter-terrorism**, which is the main priority, joint U.S.-Russian basing or combined basing in Central Asia, or combined targeting and monitoring would go a long way. Cooperation between the U.S. and Iran in fighting ISIS in Iraq was mentioned as an example where longtime adversaries found tacit mutual accommodation. At the same time, it was stressed that for the time being, Afghanistan is not a failed state and that all counter-terrorism operations should be conducted with either a clear request or a permission from the government in Kabul.
- As an insurgent group, the Taliban does not have a meaningful counter-terrorism capability and will need support on many fronts. It remains to be seen how far the U.S. and Russia would go in **helping the Taliban push against terrorism** inside Afghanistan. The Taliban is more likely to approach Pakistan or Russia rather than to seek U.S. counter-terrorism support in fighting its rivals at home.

**Contact:** Katarina Kertysova, ELN Policy Fellow, [katarinak@europeanleadershipnetwork.org](mailto:katarinak@europeanleadershipnetwork.org)