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The Return of Realpolitik: Russia, Afghanistan, and the New Eurasian Chessboard

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Few shifts in recent Eurasian geopolitics are as striking as Russia's turn toward Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Where Moscow once viewed the Taliban through the prism of the 1990s and the Soviet experience, it now speaks the cold language of strategic necessity defined by cautious engagement, counter-terror cooperation, and economic linkage. In April 2025, Russia suspended the Taliban's terrorist designation; in July, Moscow became the first capital to formally recognise the Emirate. Those moves are not symbolic window-dressing. They mark a deliberate Russian effort to make Afghanistan a piece of Eurasian realpolitik rather than a frozen problem to be ignored.

Three features explain why Moscow shifted: the transnational threat posed by Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K); Russia's need to find trade and transit corridors that skirt Western chokepoints under sanctions; and the strategic lesson of Western failure in nation-building after 2001. The Crocus City Hall massacre in March 2024, widely attributed to ISIS-K, hardened Russian elites' view that Kabul's stability is, in fact, Moscow's security. For Russian policymakers the calculus was simple: better to work with an Afghan authority that can contain ISIS-K than to risk a permissive vacuum that would export terrorism into Central Asia and Russia.

Imran Zakaria, Head of the Institute for Russian and Caucasus Studies (ASA) in Kabul, captures Moscow's logic: recognition flowed from two calculated priorities, the Taliban's demonstrated capacity to check ISIS-K and the desire to signal that a regional power, not the United States, will shape Afghanistan's future. That dual rationale explains why

tactical engagement in Moscow's view has become strategic policy, he explained in a personal conversation with the author.

This pragmatic turn should not be romanticised. It flows from pain, not affection. After the Soviet debacle and the messy 2001-21 international experiment, Russia has shed ideological reflexes in favour of capability-based assessments: who can govern, and who can deny space to violent extremist groups that threaten Russian territory and interests. The Kremlin's envoy to Kabul has repeatedly emphasised that Kabul and Moscow now share a priority: suppress ISIS-K. Sustained intelligence exchanges, limited security cooperation, and political normalisation are the tools Moscow prefers.

For Afghanistan's rulers, Russia offers two irresistible commodities: legitimacy among powerful states, and engagement outside Western sanction regimes. For a government that remains internationally ostracised on normative grounds, these are strategic lifelines. Kabul's requests are practical: help with counter-terrorism training, assistance to control narcotics trafficking, and new routes for trade and energy. For Moscow, Afghanistan promises a geographic opportunity: projection into South Asia and a transit corridor through which to bypass Western economic pressure.

The narcotics dimension is central. The Taliban have dramatically reduced opium cultivation, a shift that has both humanitarian and geopolitical implications for Russia. Kremlin strategists worry less about regime type than about drug flows and the organised crime networks that could destabilise Central Asia and Russia itself. A functioning Afghan authority that can suppress narcotics and deny terrorists transnational routes is therefore a strategic asset.

Not everyone in the region welcomes this Russian recalibration. Central Asian capitals remain cautious: they fear an Afghan spillover, the export of militancy, and an entanglement that could re-open old fractures. Yet even among sceptics, there is recognition that Moscow now operates from a position of regional proximity and leverage: it can host Taliban interlocutors openly, remove legal hurdles to engagement, and promote connectivity projects that serve a broader Eurasian frame.

Mahmad Azam Tariq, Associate Professor of International Relations at Kateb University, highlights a narrower but telling dimension: Bagram. Once the central hub of U.S. military logistics in Afghanistan, Bagram embodies the contest over basing and strategic depth. Dr Tariq argues that Russia's opposition to any U.S. re-entry at Bagram is less about abstract support for Afghan sovereignty and more about blocking Washington from regaining the sort of regional surveillance and military posture that would blunt Moscow's influence. In short, control of geography matters.

That geography helps explain why a pragmatic India-Russia-Afghanistan triangularity is conceivable even if politically sensitive. India has avoided formal recognition of the Emirate, yet it has kept channels open, preserved humanitarian and development commitments, and reopened its technical mission in Kabul. Moscow and New Delhi share overlapping interests: combating ISIS-K, curbing drug trafficking, and stabilising a neighbouring region for economic and strategic reasons. Ziaulhaq Zia of the Regional Studies Center in Kabul notes that Russia sees Afghanistan as an arena to offset strategic losses suffered in Ukraine and elsewhere; in that reading, India becomes a partner that provides complementary strengths: soft power, development experience, and South Asian access, that Russia lacks.

Can these actors translate converging interests into operational cooperation? Yes. But cautiously and incrementally. Formal political recognition by New Delhi would be politically costly and is unlikely in the near term. What is realistic, and already unfolding, are calibrated initiatives: intelligence sharing on ISIS-K, targeted development projects in agriculture and health, and connectivity work that links Central and South Asia without necessarily requiring full diplomatic endorsement. India's use of Iranian ports and revived interest in the International North-South Transport Corridor are examples of how practical projects can precede or substitute for formal recognition.

Even as pragmatism grows, moral and political limits remain. The Emirate's record on human rights, especially regarding women, is a continual brake on wider international acceptance. Any India-Russia engagement that hopes to scale will need to manage these concerns, through conditionality, multilateral development frames, and a focus on technical cooperation that improves everyday livelihoods rather than confers blanket legitimacy.

Russia's recognition of the Emirate and the diplomatic choreography around it therefore signals a wider re-arrangement: Afghanistan is being reframed from a failed state into a corridor of Eurasian geopolitics. For Moscow, engagement is a hedging strategy: it reduces the risk of blowback by armed militant groups, secures new transit options for a sanctioned economy, and projects influence into South and Central Asia. For Kabul, Russian recognition opens new fiscal and political space. For New Delhi, the strategic task is to convert goodwill and development capital into a stabilising presence that preserves Indian interests without endorsing policies New Delhi cannot accept.

The window for shaping Afghanistan's future will be narrow and transactional. Those who wish to see stability prevail, whether in Moscow, New Delhi, or Kabul, must be prepared to operate in a messy middle: engaging where interests converge, holding firm on rights where necessary, and building practical, resilient corridors of commerce and security. If that cautious architecture takes root, Afghanistan may yet become less a graveyard of empires and more a bridge in a nascent Eurasian order defined by interest, not ideology.

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