



## Regional Actors Eye Threats and Opportunities in Taliban Takeover

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**Key Takeaway:** *The Taliban's swift seizure of Kabul has altered key regional states' calculus toward Afghanistan. Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey are weighing how to take advantage of the United States' hurried withdrawal while mitigating the new terrorist threats and refugee waves from Afghanistan that will likely follow. All four states will likely recognize the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan in the coming months. The Taliban's victory also presents an opportunity for al Qaeda and other Salafi-jihadi groups to expand their havens in Afghanistan and intensify ongoing efforts to inspire terror attacks in the West capitalizing on the 20th anniversary of the September 11th attacks.*

### Russia

**Kremlin messaging on Afghanistan since August 15 has praised the Taliban's claimed "peaceful" takeover of Kabul, while Russian forces in Central Asia have responded with military exercises.** Zamir Kabulov, the Kremlin's special representative on Afghanistan, stated on August 16 that the Kremlin "prepared the ground ahead of time" to work with "the new government of Afghanistan" and claimed the Taliban seized Kabul "peacefully."<sup>1</sup> The Kremlin is officially predicating official recognition of the Taliban on the Taliban's ability to prevent jihadist attacks in Central Asia and meet unstated good governance requirements. The Kremlin has previously called on the Taliban to "prevent the spread of tensions" beyond Afghanistan's borders during meetings in Moscow in early July.<sup>2</sup> Kabulov stated that Russia does not see "a single direct threat to our allies in Central Asia" from the Taliban itself, but noted that regime change can create "a niche for other international terrorist organizations" on August 16.<sup>3</sup> Russian and partner forces are additionally increasing the frequency of

joint military exercises and are preparing for a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) exercise in the coming months. Approximately 1,000 troops at Russia's 201<sup>st</sup> Military Base in Tajikistan began snap exercises on August 17 that are ongoing as of publication.<sup>4</sup> The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) announced on August 16 that it will hold an exercise designated "Cobalt-2021" in Tajikistan "in the coming months" but did not specify a date or participants.<sup>5</sup>

**The Kremlin will likely officially recognize the Taliban and will expand Russian basing and military operations in Central Asia to combat potential jihadist forces.** The Taliban is unlikely to completely control Afghanistan's borders to meet Russia's demand, and jihadist groups and criminal networks are highly likely to proliferate in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and other Central Asian states. The Kremlin will likely accept a level of insecurity in the region above what the United States and its allies would accept and recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. The Kremlin may additionally seek to secure economic concessions such as access to mineral resources from the Taliban in exchange for recognition. The Kremlin will additionally prioritize preventing potentially destabilizing refugee flows from Afghanistan. The Russian military has prepared for several years for the potential of a renewed jihadist threat to Central Asia following a US withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Russian military deployments in Central Asia are in large part responses to this legitimate threat. However, additional Russian basing and further military cooperation with Central Asian states will support the Kremlin's campaign to integrate the militaries of the former Soviet Union under Russian structures and improve Russian force projection capabilities in the region.

## **China**

**China has accepted the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan after high-level talks between Chinese and Taliban representatives.** Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and other Taliban leaders in Tianjin, China on July 28 to discuss the Afghan peace process.<sup>7</sup> Wang recognized the Taliban as an "important military and political force in Afghanistan," while Baradar pledged the Taliban will not allow any groups to use Afghan territory to launch attacks against China.<sup>8</sup> Beijing acknowledged "major changes in the situation in Afghanistan" two days after Taliban forces seized control of Kabul, but has not closed the Chinese Embassy or endorsed a Taliban-controlled government.<sup>9</sup> Chinese leaders likely harbor concerns over the potential spillover effects of Taliban rule for Islamist militant activity in the region, which may include terrorist attacks against China. A possible suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive (SVBIED) attack on July 14, allegedly carried out by the Tehrik-I-Taliban Pakistan (TTiP), killed nine Chinese nationals working on the Dasu Dam, a hydroelectric gravity dam project in Pakistan that is part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>10</sup> Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi claimed the TTiP was operating out of Afghan territory with approval from Afghan and Indian security agencies.<sup>11</sup>

**China will likely treat the Taliban as Afghanistan's de-facto government for the foreseeable future.** US intelligence reports said that Beijing was preparing to officially recognize the Taliban once the group defeated Afghan forces, but Chinese officials have not publicly indicated such intentions.<sup>12</sup> China's top priority in Afghanistan is protecting Chinese citizens, investments, and territory from terrorist attacks. Beijing will likely continue pressuring Taliban leaders to cut ties with other insurgent networks, particularly the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which seeks to establish

a Uyghur state in Xinjiang. China may offer the Taliban infrastructure investments in exchange for the protection of Chinese nationals in the region and to establish significant political leverage over a Taliban-controlled government.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, Chinese leaders are looking to increase economic connections with Afghanistan and expand access to the country's natural resources, including rare earth metals, copper, and oil reserves.<sup>14</sup> China won exclusive rights to the Mes Aynak mine in Logar Province in 2007, but the Afghan civil war has delayed extraction of the mine's estimated \$50 billion copper deposit.<sup>15</sup> Separately, China may be planning to build a 280-km-long expressway between Peshawar and Kabul that extends the CPEC into Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

## Iran

**The Iranian regime has celebrated the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and is supporting a peaceful transition of power that includes the Taliban.** President Ebrahim Raisi lauded the American “military defeat” and called for a national Afghan agreement to achieve stability.<sup>17</sup> Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif backed a transition plan drafted by former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and expressed Iran's readiness to facilitate peace talks.<sup>18</sup> Tehran has hosted intra-Afghan dialogues previously—most recently to establish a ceasefire on July 7.<sup>19</sup> The regime is also hosting Afghan warlord and anti-Taliban leader Mohammad Ismail Khan, who fled Afghanistan on August 15.<sup>20</sup> Khan previously fled the Taliban to Iran in the late 1990s before returning to Afghanistan to resume the fight.

**Iran will likely recognize the Taliban government in the months ahead if Iranian leaders conclude that they can cooperate with the group.** Tehran seeks to work with the Taliban and other international actors to achieve its strategic objectives in Afghanistan. The Iranian objectives include:

- Avoiding conflict with the Taliban
- Neutralizing any Salafi-jihadi threat to Iran from Afghanistan
- Supporting transnational infrastructure projects that connect Iran to central Asia and China
- Defending Shi'a Afghans

Iranian state-run media has whitewashed the Taliban's image and framed the group as increasingly moderate in recent months, likely to prepare for improved relations.<sup>21</sup> Iranian authorities have also engaged with their Indian, Chinese, Russian, and Turkish counterparts on Afghanistan since early July.<sup>22</sup>

Tehran has contingency plans to contest Taliban influence if relations deteriorate and cooperation cannot guarantee Iranian interests. Iran's armed forces have militarized the border region, expanded security cooperation with Tajikistan, and may have mobilized their Afghan proxy, the Fatemiyoun Division, to defend Iranian interests if needed.<sup>23</sup>

## Turkey

**Turkey rapidly adapted to the changes in Kabul and is now offering assistance to the Taliban to maintain and expand the Turkish presence in Afghanistan.** Turkey and the United

States had previously been negotiating a now-outdated plan for Turkish troops in Afghanistan to secure the Kabul International Airport and to retain international access to the capital. Instead, Turkey is now offering "technical and security assistance" to help the new Taliban government stabilize Afghanistan, including securing the airport for the Taliban government.<sup>24</sup> The Turkish Armed Forces unit in Kabul has around 500 Turkish and 120 Azerbaijani forces located at the Kabul International Airport and currently supports the US evacuation mission.<sup>25</sup> Top Turkish officials and Taliban members have confirmed Pakistan-facilitated talks between Ankara and the Taliban, including a potential upcoming meeting between Turkish President Erdogan and the Taliban leadership.<sup>26</sup> The Taliban had previously called for the withdrawal of Turkish troops previously but its position on the Turkish offer is unknown since it captured Kabul on August 15.<sup>27</sup> Turkey has not publicly coordinated with Russia or China on the subject but may seek to deconflict or coordinate if it remains in Afghanistan.

**If the Taliban is amenable, Turkey can carve out a unique role as the only NATO country with a significant presence in Afghanistan.** If the Taliban allows Turkish troops or diplomats to remain in Afghanistan, Turkey can gain outsized influence in arranging the NATO countries' access to the country. Moreover, Ankara has made positive comments about the Taliban's "moderate" statements and publicized its informal talks with Pakistan and the Taliban—likely to justify its relations with the Taliban to the Turkish public.<sup>28</sup> The Turkish government may also help the Taliban gain some diplomatic recognition abroad to jumpstart its governing functions, to Turkish officials - a goal also articulated by President Erdogan on August 18.<sup>29</sup> Erdogan added that Turkey's role in Afghanistan could be similar to its security and military role in supporting Libya's stabilization. Turkey will additionally prioritize maintaining its longstanding economic ties to Afghanistan while filling the vacuum in the country's security, reconstruction, and political needs. However, the Turkish public's disapproval of a permanent military presence in Afghanistan may lead Turkey to prioritize political and diplomatic roles in shaping the new Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup>

## Salafi-Jihadi Groups

**Al Qaeda supporters are lauding the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.** Al Qaeda affiliates and associates, as well as pro-al Qaeda online outlets and commentators, have largely celebrated the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan as a victory for global jihad.<sup>31</sup> The collapse of the Afghan government now serves as proof of concept for al Qaeda affiliates that have already been praising the Taliban and mirroring its approach, elements of which align with al Qaeda's strategic guidance.<sup>32</sup> Al Qaeda's Mali affiliate, Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen (JNIM), has pursued negotiations with the Malian government to push French forces to withdraw from the country.<sup>33</sup> Al Shabaab, al Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia, draws parallels between the Taliban's victory over NATO in Afghanistan and its own campaign against NATO member Turkey.<sup>34</sup>

The responses of Islamic State supporters underscore the preexisting animosity between the Islamic State and the Taliban. Islamic State supporters have reacted negatively to the Taliban's promise that it will not discriminate against Shi'a Afghans.<sup>35</sup> The Islamic State's branch in Afghanistan competes with the Taliban and has continued claiming attacks in the past week to signal its relevance.<sup>36</sup>

**Salafi-jihadi groups will expand their havens in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.** The Taliban has sustained a close, if complex, relationship with al Qaeda—including hosting its leaders—and will likely continue to do so.<sup>37</sup> Intelligence officials have begun to warn that foreign fighters will mobilize to Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> The Islamic State’s Khorasan Province may also attract more recruits as it seeks to challenge the Taliban and capitalize on reduced counterterrorism pressure.

**Al Qaeda affiliates outside Afghanistan may become energized and attempt to capitalize on the withdrawal of foreign forces.** Several al Qaeda affiliates in Africa and the Middle East are waging long-running insurgencies that aim to expel foreign forces and topple national governments. Al Shabaab in Somalia is one group that is likely to mimic the Taliban’s trajectory. The group has already benefited from the withdrawal of US forces and a significant reduction in US airstrikes in 2021.<sup>39</sup> The withdrawal of African Union peacekeeping forces, which are seeking to draw down, could catalyze an al Shabaab advance on Mogadishu, particularly if political divisions continue to undermine the country’s security forces.<sup>40</sup>

The Taliban’s victory may amplify ongoing efforts by Salafi-jihadi groups to inspire terror attacks in the West, joining efforts by al Qaeda to capitalize on the upcoming 20th anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://tass dot ru/politika/12140187>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://lenta dot ru/news/2021/08/17/uchenia/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://regnum dot ru/news/polit/3345406.html>; <https://www.interfax dot ru/world/784715>.

<sup>6</sup> [vpknews dot ru/articles/42857](https://vpknews dot ru/articles/42857).

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-meets-with-taliban-stepping-up-as-u-s-exits-afghanistan-11627492777>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-foreign-min-says-bus-attack-that-killed-9-chinese-workers-was-suicide-2021-08-12/>

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<sup>11</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/12/asia/china-pakistan-india-afghanistan-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2021-08-12/china-prepared-to-recognize-taliban-if-kabul-falls-sources-say-undermining-us-threats>

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