



## Russia in Review: August 4 – August 17

By Mason Clark  
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### Russia Cements Military Presence in Central Asia and Sets Conditions to Recognize the Taliban as Afghanistan’s Government

Kremlin messaging on Afghanistan since August 15 has balanced praise for the Taliban’s supposedly “peaceful” takeover of Kabul with cautious rhetoric about officially recognizing the Taliban, which is still formally designated as a terrorist organization in Russia. Zamir Kabulov, the Kremlin’s special representative for Afghanistan, stated on August 16 that the Kremlin “prepared the ground ahead of time” to work with “the new government of Afghanistan.”<sup>1</sup> Kabulov said that Russia has retained its embassy in Kabul with security cooperation from the Taliban and praised the Taliban for taking over security in the capital “absolutely peacefully.”<sup>2</sup>

The Kremlin is officially predicating recognition of the Taliban on the Taliban’s ability to prevent jihadist attacks in Central Asia and, to a lesser

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extent, meet unstated good-governance requirements. The Kremlin previously called on the Taliban to “prevent the spread of tensions” beyond Afghanistan’s borders during meetings in Moscow in early July.<sup>3</sup> Kabulov said Russia does not see “a single direct threat to our allies in Central Asia” from the Taliban itself but

noted on August 16 that regime change can create “a niche for other international terrorist organizations.”<sup>4</sup> The Kremlin has additionally paid lip service to requiring the Taliban to meet undefined standards of governance but will likely focus on security concerns. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Russia is in no hurry to recognize the Taliban but also claimed that the Taliban has expressed the desire to have a government “with other political forces” and continue the functions of the Afghan state.<sup>5</sup> Kabulov said that Russia will likely remove the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations if the Taliban “continues to behave peacefully.”<sup>6</sup> Russian rhetoric suggests that Moscow is seeking unspecified concessions from the Taliban before recognizing it. Those concessions will likely go beyond assurances about containing terrorism and good governance.

**Russian and partner forces are increasing the frequency of joint military exercises in Central Asia and are preparing for a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) exercise in the coming months.** Russian and partner forces conducted several major exercises in August prior to the fall of Kabul. Over 2,500 Russian, Tajik, and Uzbek troops conducted joint exercises to practice preventing militants from crossing the border at a training ground in the Khatlon region of Tajikistan, approximately 20 kilometers from the Afghan border, from August 5-10.<sup>7</sup> Roughly 1,500 Russian and Uzbek troops conducted concurrent joint exercises in Uzbekistan from August 2-7.<sup>8</sup> Russian and partner forces announced several additional exercises following the fall of Kabul on August 15. 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 August 19.<sup>9</sup> The Kazakh military raised its state of readiness and began readiness checks on August 16 and notified reservists of possible deployment, following Tajikistan’s previous mobilization on July 22.<sup>10</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 the participants.<sup>11</sup> The Kremlin-dominated CSTO has previously declined Tajik requests for military deployments to the border with Afghanistan. The Kremlin maintains that Russian and partner forces are sufficient to secure the border with Afghanistan but retains the option to deploy the CSTO’s rapid reaction force if needed.<sup>12</sup> The Kremlin likely seeks to secure bilateral ties and direct Russian basing in Central Asian states, rather than immediately leverage the multinational CSTO force.

**The Kremlin will likely officially recognize the Taliban and will expand Russian basing and military operations in Central Asia to combat potential jihadist threats.** Russia’s demands incentivize the Taliban to prevent third-party jihadist groups from attacking neighboring states. However, the Taliban is unlikely to completely control Afghanistan’s borders, 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 normally tolerate 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 also 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>13</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.

1. **All four of Russia's military districts conducted concurrent international military exercises in early August, demonstrating the Russian military's increasing operational capacity.** Russian forces held three exercises with Chinese, Laotian, and Indian forces August 1-13. Approximately 13,000 Russian and Chinese troops participated in the joint Russian-Chinese strategic exercise "Interaction 2021" in the Ningxia Hui region of northwestern China from August 9-13.<sup>14</sup> The Russian and Chinese defense ministers observed the joint conventional operations by Russian and Chinese motorized infantry and aviation units.<sup>15</sup> Russian and Laotian forces held the joint "Laros-2021" exercise in the Primorsky region of eastern Russia from August 11-19.<sup>16</sup> Five hundred personnel from both states practiced counterterror operations in the second iteration of the Laros exercise since 2019, which the Kremlin intends as a regular joint exercise. Finally, Russian and Indian forces held a similar joint "Indra-2021" exercise in the Volgograd region of southern Russia from August 1-13.<sup>17</sup> Five hundred personnel practiced counterterror operations and exchanged best practices from prior operations. The Russian military's ability to conduct major international exercises in the Southern and Eastern Military Districts concurrent with large-scale exercises in Central Asia commanded by the Central Military District and preparations in the Western Military District for the Zapad-2021 exercises demonstrate its increasing readiness and operational flexibility. The Kremlin is additionally

successfully advancing its campaign to secure international security partnerships to offset the limits of Russia's growing but limited military footprint.<sup>18</sup>

2. **Russian forces deployed to Belarus for the Zapad-2021 exercises in early August that could become part of a permanent military presence in that country.** Russia deployed the 60<sup>th</sup> Command Brigade of the 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army to Belarus on August 4.<sup>19</sup> The 60<sup>th</sup> Communication Brigade is the command and control (C2) element of Russia's 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army – the premier conventional unit of the Russian Army.<sup>20</sup> The deployment of this C2 element to Belarus indicates the likely participation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army in Zapad-2021. The 60<sup>th</sup> Communications Brigade could additionally serve as the primary C2 element of a permanent Russian deployment to Belarus following Zapad, as previously forecasted by ISW.<sup>21</sup> Several additional Russian and Belarusian units deployed to their designated training grounds for Russia's Zapad-2021 exercise since ISW's previous publication on Zapad preparations on August 5.<sup>22</sup> Elements of the Belarusian 19<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Brigade deployed to an unspecified training ground in western Russia on August 11 and conducted preparatory exercises with Russian forces on August 17.<sup>23</sup> Elements of the Belarusian 60<sup>th</sup> Communications Regiment additionally deployed to Russia's Mulino training ground on August 16. The Belarusian 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Brigades, unspecified logistics units, and several air force and air defense units held exercises to prepare for Zapad in Belarus August 3-12.<sup>24</sup>

3. **Russia's ruling United Russia party is leveraging individually popular Russians to reverse the party's declining approval ahead of Russian Duma (parliament) elections scheduled for September 17-19.** The top five candidates on United Russia's parliamentary list participated in the opening of a new United Russia headquarters in Moscow on August 9 and billed themselves as "Putin's Team."<sup>25</sup> The top five candidates are Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, Moscow hospital chief Denis Protsenko, presidential science and education coordinator Elena Shmeleva, and Children's Rights Commissioner Anna Kuznetsova. The five participants gave speeches claiming United Russia is essential to success in their respective policy areas. The five candidates are almost certain to decline their parliamentary seats, which will be filled by United Russia candidates lower on the party list. United Russia is likely attempting to leverage approval of key public figures and link support for United Russia as a party to support for Putin to bolster its own popularity ahead of Duma elections scheduled for September 17-19. United Russia held only a 30 percent approval rating as of the most recent state-run polls in June 2021 – compared to a 62 percent approval rating for President Putin.<sup>26</sup> United Russia currently holds 54 percent of seats in Russia's parliament, and the Kremlin will likely need to heavily falsify results, despite a coordinated Kremlin campaign to sideline potential opposition throughout 2021.
4. **The Baltic states enacted border restrictions to slow the Belarusian campaign to traffic refugees into the EU.** The Belarusian government has transported refugees, primarily from

Iraq, to the borders of Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland in an effort to destabilize its neighbors and reverse EU sanctions enacted on Belarus since June 2021 in response to the Belarusian government's forcible detention of journalist Roman Protasevich.<sup>27</sup> Latvia announced a state of emergency in its regions bordering Belarus on August 10, and Lithuania announced a program on August 13 to give migrants trafficked from Belarus 300 euros and a flight to their home countries.<sup>28</sup> Lithuanian border guards have filmed Belarusian border guards driving migrants to the border, dismantling border fences, and entering Lithuanian territory to escort migrants.<sup>29</sup> Self-proclaimed Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko tacitly admitted to the campaign on August 9, denying Belarus is "blackmailing" Europe with illegal immigration but stating that Belarus is reacting to EU sanctions "according to its capabilities" in response to a reporter's question on Belarusian support for the migrants.<sup>30</sup> The Iraqi government indefinitely suspended all flights to Belarus on August 6 following pressure from EU officials.<sup>31</sup> Lukashenko's efforts are unlikely to coerce the EU to remove its sanctions but may destabilize Poland and the Baltic states and lead to political strife.

5. **Belarus announces a socio-economic development program for 2021-2025 that contains several concessions to Russia.** Belarus' official socio-economic development program for 2021-2025, published on August 4, states that Belarus' "main vector" of economic growth should be with Russia within the framework of the Union State, a Kremlin-preferred supranational structure that Putin seeks to leverage to secure control over several aspects of the Belarusian state.<sup>32</sup> The

document states Belarus' main criteria for further integration with the Union State are ensuring equal economic conditions between Russia and Belarus, equal energy usage, joint access to markets, and Belarusian control of financial instruments. The document also emphasizes developing economic relations with the Eurasian Economic Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States. The document additionally singles out China as a key country to develop ties with. The Kremlin likely pressured Belarus over the past year to include Union State integration as a key priority. In the wake of EU sanctions on Belarus and reduced trade with Western Europe, Belarus can no longer see European states as viable economic partners and will be

increasingly reliant on Russian economic support. However, Lukashenko will likely continue his efforts to delay economic integration with Russia and will seek to diversify Belarus' economy with China and other states to reduce his dependence on Russia.<sup>33</sup>

### Contributors to this Report:

Mason Clark  
George Barros  
Will Baumgardner  
Brian Darios  
Catherine Hodgson  
Rachel Kenny  
Matthew Sparks

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- <sup>18</sup> Nataliya Bugayova, "Putin's Offset: The Kremlin's Geopolitical Adaptations Since 2014," *Institute for the Study of War*, September 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Putin%27s%20Offset%20The%20Kremlin%27s%20Geopolitical%20Adaptations%20Since%202014.pdf>.
- <sup>19</sup> The Belarusian military did not report the name of the unit and the Russian military has not acknowledged the brigade's deployment. However, the Belarusian Ministry of Defense reported the arrival of a unit commanded by "Alexander Gorlov" with accompanying photos on August 4.

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Alexander Gorlov commanded the 60th Communications Brigade as of July 29, 2021 and participated in preparations for Zapad throughout 2021, so it is highly likely his unit has deployed to Belarus. ["Welcome!"] *Belarusian Military Information Agency*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.vayar dot mil by/news/137210/>; ["ZVO Signalmen Worked out a Training Alert in Preparation for the SSU 'Zapad-2021',"] *Izvestia*, June 29, 2021, <https://iz dot ru/1185587/2021-06-29/sviazisty-zvo-otrabotali-uchebnuiu-trevogu-v-ramkakh-podgotovki-k-ssu-zapad-2021>.

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Harris, "Russia's Military Posture: Ground Forces Order of Battle," *Institute for the Study of War*, March 2018, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/russias-military-posture>.

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