



## Understanding Russia's Responses to the New Taliban Government Through Russian Mainstream Media Viewpoint

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### **Abstract**

The incident of the withdrawal of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 has implications for the country's stability. With the rise of Taliban as the new government regime in Afghanistan, making the group once again back in full control of all policies taken which has the potential to influence the area around Afghanistan. Russia, which has interests in the Central Asia region and coincidentally borders directly with Afghanistan, also took a stand in responding to the Taliban as the new supreme authority in Afghanistan and take precautions to secure their position and influence. This research was conducted and aims to analyze the policies taken by Russia in observing political phenomenon in Afghanistan since it was no longer occupied by the United States, especially how Russia views Taliban, who had been in conflict with Russia in the past. Using descriptive qualitative research methods, this research collects data that has been taken from Russian news channel to be processed later using content analysis techniques and presented in a comprehensive and complex manner. The results of this study indicate that unlike Western countries, Russia tends to be open in accepting the Taliban as the new government in Afghanistan, on the other hand, remains alert to potential threats that could arise in the Central Asia region.

**Keywords:** *Taliban; Afghanistan; Russia; National Interest; Mainstream Media*

### **Introduction**

Propaganda spread by Western countries (the United States and its allies) indicates that the Middle East is a conflict area that produce many terrorist groups. Doubled with the historical record of various events that threaten international security issues, it further strengthens the position of Western countries, especially the United States in getting support to fight all forms of terrorism, where the resistance policy initiated by George W. Bush is known for Global War on Terrorism (Jackson, 2020). Some terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban use their home territories as defense and operations bases as well as their main headquarters. As terrorist or extremist organizations, they have a reputation for carrying out various actions that often trigger conflicts and threaten national and international regional security. The bombing of the World Trade Center towers in New York, United States run by Al Qaeda became one of the most common examples of how much of a potential threat they

can produce. Frequently, these organizations also seek to take control of the government in the country they are based on operations, as was done by the Taliban, which last year, precisely on August 15, 2021 for the second time became the ruling regime of the Afghan government, after the last two decades the United States and its allies invaded the country (Suastha, 2021).

Tracing its history, the Taliban is an organization formed after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in the early 1990s (Putra, 2021). Taliban, terminologically is the plural form of the word 'Talib', which in Arabic means claimant of knowledge or disciple and specifically refers to men. Based on the term, Taliban can be interpreted as students who study in Islamic education schools or better known as madrassas. This confirms that the role of madrassas was crucial for the beginning of the formation of the ideology adopted by the Taliban organization (Ashghor, 2021). Furthermore, the position of madrassas in Afghanistan is not only a place of learning, but also as a social instrument that can unite various ethnicities and tribes grouped into social groups (Glatzer, 1998). Madrassas have a great influence not only in the social aspect, but also in politics. Starting from the time of the invasion of the Soviet Union, where madrassas could consolidate the political situation in Afghanistan and continued until the Taliban regime in 1996 which was the beginning of Taliban rule in Afghanistan (Edwards, 2002).

Based on an Islamist-nationalist ideology, the Taliban was formed by Mullah Mohammad Omar, with the aim of making Afghanistan a peaceful country through the strict application of Islamic teachings for all its people in every aspect of state life (Anugerah & Purba, 2021). As they moved, the Taliban began to be considered as an extremist group that fought on the basis of Islam. The first time the Taliban regime came to power, almost ninety percent of Afghanistan's territory was successfully occupied and controlled. Various strategic areas such as Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar entered into their territory and this indicates that the Afghan government has been completely controlled by the Taliban. However, the Taliban are considered to have committed violations of human rights under the laws they enforce. The impact was that the Taliban regime was ostracized and isolated by various other countries in the world. Only Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia recognize the Taliban regime (Katzman & Thomas, 2017). In 2001, the Taliban were ousted from power by the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) through Operation Enduring Freedom, as an initial step in the policy of resistance to terrorism by the United States (Rahmatullah & Hamidah, 2021).

After the political event that occurred in Afghanistan in 2021, and with many countries have made negative assumptions about the Taliban, Russia has shown an open hand gesture to the group, which is still labeled a terrorist group by the West, including Russia itself. Since the Taliban returned to the highest power in the Afghan government, it has not been easy to restore stability to the country. Russia did not rule out cooperation with Afghanistan under the leadership of the Taliban, even on several occasions Russia held a dialogue with the Taliban in the Kremlin. This becomes interesting to observe because if we look at history, Afghanistan had a bad relationship with the Soviet Union. Having established a partnership, the Soviet Union decided to invade Afghanistan in 1979 under the pretext of resolving the unfavorable political situation for the Soviet Union at that time, where Afghanistan was led by Hafizullah Amin who had studied in the United States and could not be trusted by the Soviet Union (Monroe, 2014). The invasion lasted for a decade until 1989 and ended with the Soviet Union withdrawing their troops from Afghanistan after encountering resistance from Afghanistan which at the time had support from America, China, Pakistan and several other countries. This invasion also triggered the birth of the Taliban group in Afghanistan (History, 2022).

In the period from the early 1990s (the year the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan) to the present, there have been many political events that have occurred in Afghanistan, and the occupation by the United States and NATO for two decades is one of them. Now, with the Taliban once again seizing power in Afghanistan and needing a lot of resources, Russia is open to providing support and is evidenced by Russian political action to keep its diplomats in Afghanistan, while other countries that have since been occupied by the Taliban Kabul evacuate their diplomats. Many experts argue that the maneuvers

carried out by the Russians are an attempt to protect their interests in the Central Asia region. It is worth remembering that Russia has military bases in several regions of Central Asia such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Former Secretary-General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Nikolai Bordyuzha said that dialogue with the Taliban would be indispensable if peace is to be realized in Central Asia. In line with Bordyuzha, Alexander Baunov, a senior colleague from the Carnegie Moscow Center argues that Russia's view of the Taliban is already different and does not see "this version" of the Taliban as an enemy (Iswara, 2021).

There is no denying that Russia has a long history with Afghanistan. Even before 2021, Russia pursued a multi-vector and complex, even likely incoherent policy towards Afghanistan. Given the current political situation in Afghanistan, Russia's approach to Afghanistan raises a question: How does Russia view the new Taliban government? This question is based on several considerations, including by looking at the track record of Russia's relations with Afghanistan so far. Where the bitter experience experienced by Russia when it was still in the form of the Soviet Union (also known as "the Afghan Syndrome") so that it sees Afghanistan using a complex point of view, including as a threat. As well as the implications of the withdrawal of the United States that can be assumed will increase the chances of Russia in spreading their political influence in the Central Asia region. This study was conducted with the intention of fulfilling several objectives that can be achieved after the questions of this study are answered, which consist of understanding Russia's view of the Taliban as the new government regime in Afghanistan, to understand how the response from Russia to the political event that occur in Afghanistan since it is no longer occupied by the United States, and to understand the situation of bilateral relations between Russia and Afghanistan under the leadership of the Taliban.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

In order to answering the question posed, two approaches are used, consisting of the theory of realism and the concept of national interest.

Realism is one of the oldest, and also most dominant theory in international relations. This theory places the state as the main actor in the practice of international relations and is divided into several schools such as classical realism and neorealism. Broadly speaking, realism places the use of power at the center of all state behavior. Hans Morgenthau, a figure of realism argues that human desire for power is a fact and also as the essence of mankind (Morgenthau, 1993). So, realism assumes that it becomes natural when every action that is the result of state policy is based on maximizing their power, so that whatever the country's goals are can be achieved better (Bakry, 2017).

Realism has basic assumptions that become a way of observing at international politics. These basic assumptions consist of international actors, characteristics of the international structure, and state objectives. Of the three assumptions, state objectives are the most rational aspect in examining the context that occurs between Russia and Afghanistan, if you want to see it from the Russia's point of view. Realism sees the state as a self-interested entity. Not without reason, because when referring to realist scholars such as Niccolo Machiavelli or Thomas Hobbes, who describe human nature as prone to selfishness and thirst for power, the view of realism becomes reasonable. And the objectives of the state, in international relations will always boil down to two things; security and power. Specifically, the objectives of the state are summarized in a concept, namely the concept of national interest.

National interest is one of the concepts that according to the main stream in the study of international relations is very important as the basis of a country in conducting relations between countries. In accordance with the theory of realism, national interests often ignore morality in implementing international behavior. National interest is also closely related to power as one of the ultimate goals of a country. With its nature that is often perceived as destructive or hard power, the

consequences of the implementation of national interests in the international system are widely regarded as anarchy and can trigger competition, balance of power to conflicts that can lead to war. This can be seen if we look at history, where the state prioritizes national interests as well as the consequences. World Wars I and II, The Cold War to the practice of colonization are some examples of the phenomenon of conflictual international relations, especially those that occur on the European continent (Bainus & Rachman, 2018).

The national interest becomes an important concept in achieving the objectives of the state if these objectives consist of security and power. Basically, no matter how big or how strong a country is, every country wants security. And one of the ways to gain security is to strengthen the influence of power from a state. This logic makes sense because if it focuses on the state's objectives, it can be concluded that the highest interest of a country in international relations is to achieve national security and become a strong and even powerful country (Rosyidin, 2020).

### **Research Methods**

This research was conducted using qualitative descriptive method. Descriptive is a research method whose end result will be a description or generalization of all the facts and data found during the research process. In research, descriptive methods are often used to present the findings of a study that is not obtained based on statistical calculations to draw specific conclusions (Thabroni, 2022), where the findings in this study were obtained using qualitative methods. According to Walidin, Saifullah and Tabrani (2015), research using qualitative methods is used to understand the variety of phenomena that occur in human life, where the data obtained are presented using sentence structure and based on natural conditions by creating a comprehensive and complex picture.

The data found in this study were processed using content analysis techniques, which have the nature of a focused and in-depth discussion of the content of information published in the mass media. Content analysis is a technique used to draw conclusions about a message by identifying various characteristics in the message in an objective, generalist, and systematic manner. The content analyzed in this study was taken from an English-language news channel based and owned by Russia called Russia Today. All data that has been collected is processed and presented using graphs, to then draw conclusions.



**Picture 1: Data analysis process**

The news analyzed from Russia Today is news related to the Taliban and published in the last year, starting from August 2021 to November 2022. In this study, there are 200 news collected as data to be processed using the process of content analysis.

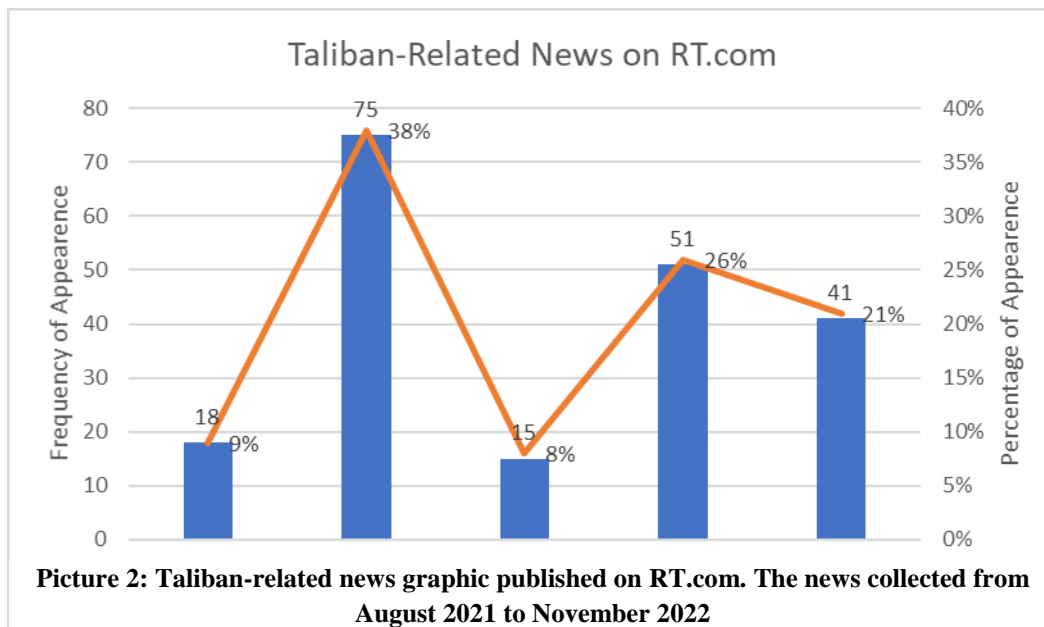
### **Findings**

Russia Today, better known as RT, is a Russian news channel (television network and website) that provides breaking news and documentaries on global issues. RT was launched in 2005 as an international news channel aimed at viewers and readers from outside Russia, so RT provides language alternatives in up to seven languages, including English, Arabic, Spanish, French, German, Serbian, and Russian. Despite being a news company funded by the Russian government, RT still does not get any intervention in news coverage, aka editorially independent (Fisher, 2013).

However, RT still has an important role as ‘spokesman’ of the Kremlin which reflects the official position of the Russian government. This was clarified directly by Russian President Vladimir Putin in an interview with RT. Putin believes that when the RT plan was launched, the Russian government wanted to form a new axis that would not only spread non-biased news about events taking place in Russia, but also weaken the West’s monopoly on global information flows. Despite these goals, Putin did not reject the assumption that RT represents Russia’s position in the global sphere. But Putin insisted that he never intended to make RT as a means of apologetics for Russia against all their political policies, both at home and abroad.

A Moscow-based journalist, Julia Ioffe, said that RT is often seen as a tool for Russia to exercise soft-power to improve Russia’s image abroad, which is often used by the Kremlin to counter the anti-Russian bias they see in mainstream media from the West (Ioffe, 2010). RT considers that they have the same right to show their partiality in displaying news, just as CNN or BBC do. Like how RT took a stand to support Russia during the conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008.

In the context of Russia’s position and the policies they are implementing for Afghanistan, RT provides a fairly clear picture of how Russia views the Taliban government, which has been one year old since they took Afghanistan from the United States and its allies. All of the data collected in this study is news that displays Russia’s views on the Taliban from various sectors, including the sector political, economic, security, and humanitarian sectors, as well as how the condition of Afghanistan as a third world country. All of them are indicators in collecting data considering that these five sectors have been the most affected since the Taliban took over the government in Afghanistan. Not only is Russia’s relationship with Afghanistan, the data also aggregates Afghanistan-related news with the international community, and because they are published entirely by RT, they represent Russia’s views in general.



### 1. Afghanistan As A Third World Country

20 years of war in Afghanistan made the country devastated and affected almost all aspects of people’s lives there. Now, after the Taliban occupied the Afghan government, the international world has a mixed perception in seeing this phenomenon. The same goes for the Afghan people. Despite the humanitarian crisis and a bleak future ahead, Kabul as Afghanistan's capital still looks the same as when the country was still a republic.

Kabul airport has not fully resumed operations at full capacity. Since the Taliban captured the city in August 2021, most international airlines have suspended flights to Afghanistan until the situation stabilizes. Negotiations are still ongoing over the operation of Kabul airport, which Qatar and Turkey have begun with the Taliban. This is necessary given the security demands still not fulfilled by the Taliban. Foreigners coming to Afghanistan are required to register and fill out forms related to the purpose of their arrival, the duration of their stay and their marital status. This is in accordance with the new regulations set by the Taliban. Although there are rumors that this regime prohibits women from having jobs, there are still women who work at Kabul airport and are flight attendants (Kovalskaya, 2022).

There are checkpoints at several points in Afghanistan, one of which is about a kilometer from the airport exit. Unlike Afghanistan's time as a republic country, where checkpoints were concentrated in the city center and not far from strategic offices such as ministries and embassies, checkpoints under Taliban control were scattered throughout the city and spread. There are also patrols carried out by the Taliban using humvees that were once operated by the Afghan National Army (ANA). After the Taliban took control of Kabul, some former ANA soldiers who had not been captured or killed disguised themselves as civilians to avoid retaliation from the Taliban for therfugitives ANA carried out against the Taliban in the past.

A journalist, Charlie Stone said that it would be difficult for Afghanistan under the Taliban government to become a tourist destination, as predicted by British General Sir Nick Carter (Sengupta, 2021). With the situation and conditions in Afghanistan where there are many prohibitions and restrictions such as alcohol and music restrictions, it will be difficult for this third world country to become like Vietnam which was aggressively renovated by the United States military and managed to become a tourist destination. Although General Carter said that 'Taliban 2.0' has changed and many stakeholders in this government want to govern in a more modern way. He added that it is not impossible that Afghanistan in the next five years will become a more inclusive country than it should (Stone, 2021).

## 2. Politics

News related to Russia's political interests in Afghanistan was identified as the most published RT in their website. About 38% of the total data collected discussed Russia's steps in responding to the revolution that occurred in Afghanistan. In general, Russia is not closed to the presence of the Taliban, it tends to be open in conducting political dialogue. Quoted from RT (2021), in October 2021 Russia officially invited Taliban representatives to Moscow to discuss the future of Afghanistan after the death of United States troops. This meeting, according to Russian presidential envoy Vladimir Putin, is also a form of open diplomacy between Russia and the new Afghan government.

Putin's move could be interpreted as a sign that Russia can recognize the Taliban as the legitimate Afghan government. Zamir Kabulov as the official envoy of Putin to Afghanistan stated that the door to recognition of the Taliban as the new government is already open and there is no need to rush to give recognition. In fact, according to the news published by RT in February 2022, Russia is ready to support the Taliban in obtaining recognition from the world government, provided that the commitments given to the Taliban have been fulfilled. Kabulov said the Taliban should be able to guarantee at least two things. First, there is the inclusion of ethnopolitics in their government. The second is that the Taliban is obliged to respect and fulfill the fundamentals of human rights. Kabulov took as an example the right of women to work in Afghanistan and other civil rights (Viryasov, 2022). Russia's stance in favor of recognition of the Taliban was even more clearly seen through an official statement from Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, where after his meeting with Amir Khan Muttaqi as Afghan Foreign Minister in March 2022, he convinced the international community to actively engage with the new government in Afghanistan. According to Lavrov, This is also a step towards recognition from the UN and all its member states (RT, 2022).

On the other hand, Russia highlighted the failure of the United States in Afghanistan over the fall of Kabul, the Afghan capital to the hands of the Taliban which according to Russia is not a political strategy but the result of the failure of the United States in intervening in Afghanistan. Kabulov viewed the attempt of the United States is to make the chaos look like a deliberate act, and led the public to believe that United States-trained Afghan soldiers could contain the Taliban. The Russian embassy to the United Kingdom, through its official Twitter account, stated that the objective reality is that the position of the United States as a hegemonic country is starting to recede against the background that the political positions of Russia and China are starting to strengthen. This statement was confirmed by the Russian Embassy in Afghanistan, which remains operational. At the same time, countries such as France, Britain and the United States have moved their ambassadors to NATO-owned airports to be evacuated.

### 3. Security

In response to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Russia implemented several policies related to their security sector. As a country geographically not too far from Afghanistan, Russia took offensive action by holding large-scale war games held with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The drills were conducted on the Afghan border and aimed to secure the borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan with Afghanistan, in anticipation of an attack from the Taliban. This action is important for Russia, especially since the Taliban managed to take over Afghanistan's borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in August 2021. Nevertheless, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu said that the Taliban had promised not to carry out actions that violate the borders and invade the territory of neighboring countries (Tickle, 2021). Russia's response is reasonable considering that the Central Asia region is a strategic region for Russia, where they have a reputation as a country with a dominating power in the region. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were once part of the Soviet Union.

Other preventive measures have been taken by Russia, one of which is by holding a dialogue with Taliban representatives in Moscow. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the Taliban not to use Afghanistan as a means to destabilize their neighbor. Lavrov highlighted efforts by the Taliban to stabilize the military and political situation in Afghanistan, but stressed that the urgency to achieve peace in the country is greater. He also praised the efforts the Taliban have made to date to establish peace in their country (RT, 2021). The urgency emphasized by Russia cannot be separated from the threat of terrorist groups such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), where the group has an affiliate in Afghanistan under the name ISIS-K (ISIS-Khorasan). In September 2022, a suicide bombing in Kabul killed 25 people including two embassy staff from Russia. The bomb detonated not far from the gates of the Russian Embassy Office identified ISIS-K as the perpetrator of the bombing (RT, 2022).

As the United States and NATO have withdrawn their forces from Afghanistan, Russia says the arrival of both entities in Afghanistan could undermine the security already established by Russia and *The Collective Security Treaty Organization* (CSTO) in the country. Lavrov stated in March 2022 that the presence of Western military forces would be contrary to the interests of the CSTO, all of which are members of the former Soviet Union. He also stressed that Russia will not tolerate Western military presence in the Central Asia region, and took the example of the occupation carried out by the West in Afghanistan as a complete failure in an attempt to impose foreign methods and values on the Afghan people (RT, 2022).

### 4. Humanity

After Afghanistan became a country affected by the war for 20 years, the international community also sent humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan such as logistical needs, funding and evacuation of the population. However, Russia has its own view in looking at this phenomenon. As Vassily Nebenzia, Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, said at a Security Council meeting in New York, the United States is largely responsible for restoring and compensating Afghans for a "meaningless occupation" of 20 years. This statement was denied by the United States, as stated by Linda Thomas-

Greenfield as ambassador from the United States. He highlighted that Russia did not make a significant contribution to responding to assistance to Afghanistan. He added that Russia too much criticized the problems in Afghanistan as a form of fault of the West, without providing any assistance.

Nebenzia responded by saying that Russia has and will continue to help Afghanistan, and reiterated that the United States must bear the burden of rebuilding Afghanistan, after the country has been greatly affected by the arrival of US troops and allies for almost two decades (RT, 2022). As quoted from RT, Nebenzia said that what the United States did was not a reasonable proportion, which did not admit mistakes and correct them, instead charging Russia for not wanting to “pay the bills” of the United States.

Apart from the interests of Russia and the United States, Afghanistan has humanitarian issues that cannot be separated from international attention. In December 2021, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a 25-page report that 47 former members of the Afghan security forces and military who surrendered and were detained by the Taliban between August and October 2021 were killed or disappeared. The United States and its allies respond to the actions of the Taliban as a serious violation of human rights and contrary to the amnesty that the Taliban has announced. Where previously, the United States has requested that the Taliban effectively apply amnesty to former members of the security forces and officials of the previous Afghan government and ensure that this amnesty is thoroughly enforced (RT, 2021). This event allowed the United States and its allies to continue to judge the Taliban based on the actions of the Taliban.

## 5. Economy

Restoring economic stability has been one of the biggest jobs for the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Being a country that is no longer under occupation from the United States, Afghanistan is making many efforts in various sectors to restore stability to their economy after previously receiving economic support from the United States. As in the tourism sector, where the Taliban appealed for international flights to Afghanistan to resume operations. The suspension of international flights to Afghanistan, according to foreign ministry spokesman from Afghanistan Abdul Qahar Balkhi has left many Afghans stranded abroad, as well as being an obstacle in traveling for work and education matters (RT, 2021). He also claimed that all problems at Kabul airport had been resolved and promised full cooperation with airlines.

Not only from the tourism sector, the Taliban also utilize other potential that Afghanistan has, including the natural resources they have, namely marijuana cultivation. The development made by the Taliban in exporting marijuana is quite promising, as evidenced by the interest to invest from foreign parties in the production of this plant, which even the total investment is estimated at hundreds of billions US Dollars. German research and development company Cpharm International (ECI), at the beginning of 2022, has planned to invest in Afghanistan, where the main goal is to produce cannabis with medical purposes (RT, 2022). In addition to marijuana, Afghanistan also has several other business lines of cultivation of plants containing narcotic substances such as heroin and opium. On the other hand, Russia and its allies strongly oppose the circulation of narcotics by placing the military around the Afghan border. The Taliban are trying to regulate the illicit drug trade that can fund them, even though they are bound by regulations prohibiting heroin use among them (RT, 2021).

Despite all these efforts, the Afghan economy relies heavily on the assets frozen by the United States over the Afghan central bank worth 7 billion US Dollars stored in the Federal Reserve Bank. The United States refused to liquidate assets frozen since the Taliban took over the Afghan government, citing concerns over the Taliban returning to hide terrorists (RT, 2022). Nevertheless, economic experts from several countries such as the United Kingdom, India, the United States, France, Canada, Australia, and Brazil advised the United States to disburse these assets and argued that the disbursement of assets belonging to Afghanistan is very important to ensure the return of economic stability in Afghanistan. Not



without reason, this document is also based on the occurrence of an economic and humanitarian catastrophe that took place in the country (RT, 2022). The United States agreed to hold a dialogue on the disbursement of Afghan assets after the United Nations warned that there could be an acute famine in the country by the winter of 2022. And in September 2022, the United States transferred 3.5 billion US Dollars of these assets to a bank in Switzerland which will later be used to strengthen macroeconomic conditions in Afghanistan (RT, 2022).

## ***Discussions***

The polemics that occurred in Afghanistan have been highlighted by many Western viewpoints, but it seems that the Russian perspective is one that is not widely discussed in scientific analysis. In 2014, after the withdrawal of the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan to assist the former Afghan government in ensuring effective security, Russia began to view developments in Afghanistan as a strategic challenge and expressed growing concern over possible stability in the country. Although Russia under Vladimir Putin has established complex multilateral relations with Afghanistan, neighboring countries and the Western bloc, many experts in Russia are still assessing developments in Afghanistan through historical context. Judging from the phenomenon, Afghan Syndrome still seems to be a very strong parameter as well as a warning to Russia against any approach in Afghanistan.

### **1. Russia's Policy Towards Afghanistan Before 2021**

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 after spending the previous decade at war with Afghanistan, as well as the fall of Mohammad Najibullah as president of the Russian-backed Afghanistan in 1992, Russia became more wary of direct relations of any kind against Afghanistan. With growing Russian suspicion of Taliban involvement with international Islamist groups and Chechen rebel forces, Russia has shown interest in building ties with the West, especially since the 9/11 attacks in an effort to improve Russia's position globally. Aiming to counter terrorism and a common antagonist of Islamic fundamentalism, Russia and the United States formed a coalition in 2000 and provided an opportunity for the two countries to work together. However, this cooperation did not last too long, especially since NATO's expansion towards the Baltic countries and the withdrawal of the United States from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty made Russia-United States cooperation relations slowly eroded (Stent, 2021). This development makes Russia worried if the presence of the West will shift their influence in the Afghan region. This is exacerbated by Russia's disrespect for the United States and NATO as actors standing equally. From 2009 onwards, Russia decided to recalibrate their policy towards Afghanistan in a different way, making Russia's actions in Kabul even more inconsistent. It can be seen from how Russia provided information and provided assistance to the US-led coalition, but on the other hand also curbed US influence in the Afghan region by pressuring Kyrgyzstan to end the US lease on the Manas' base (Miles, 2015).

These considerations eventually became the backdrop for Russia to abandon their previous vigilance against the Taliban and begin direct contacts in the Afghan region. The United States condemned the actions of Russia that built relations with the Taliban and alleged that the Taliban had been supported by Russia (Kaura, 2021). Russian top brass hold the view that the Taliban cannot be defeated using only military force. Russia cannot simply ignore the growing diplomatic interest in Afghanistan. Given the indications of the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan that would trigger many countries such as China, the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates to engage their interests in Afghanistan, Russia would inevitably have to get into trouble in Afghanistan to maintain their monopoly in the security sector in the Eurasian region.

A study conducted in 2014 showed that Russia's main interest in Afghanistan is to stabilize the situation in the domestic sphere, which can indirectly affect the limitation of threats that can arise from Afghanistan. This indication of Russian interests has been seen even since the Taliban was overthrown by the United States and its allies in 2001, where Russia has tried to build good relations with Hamid Karzai, the former President of Afghanistan. Also by establishing various regional frameworks with Afghanistan through the meeting of heads of state involving Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan (Lang, 2014). This meeting was also marked by cooperation with China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (CSO), where Afghanistan has since 2012 had observer status in this cooperation scheme. Russia also did not rule out cooperation with the Taliban, according to the statement of the official Russian envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov that the interests of the Taliban objectively have similarities with the interests of Russia in the fight against Islamic State (IS). Kabulov also hinted that Russia and the Taliban have a channel to exchange information (Roth, 2015). In December 2016, Russia identified Afghanistan as one of the priorities in regional foreign policy in accordance with the concept of Russian foreign policy. Still in the same month, Russia held its first mediation initiative with Afghanistan marked by trilateral consultations with China and Pakistan and spearheaded Moscow's Format to highlight Russia's emphasis on achieving a political settlement based on regionalism. Since then, Russia has continued to open up opportunities for other mediations with Afghanistan. Until in February 2019 Russia held the first dialogue that brought together former Afghan government figures, former leaders of the Northern Alliance, representatives of the Taliban, and immigrants from Afghanistan (Chia & Haiqi, 2021)

## 2. Russia's Stance on the New Taliban Government

The departure of the United States and NATO from Afghanistan in August 2021 did make it easier for Russia in the context of strategic competition in the international sphere. But the absence of a foreign power in Afghanistan could leave Russia facing increasing instability and uncertainty that could put it up to new challenges. As a country heavily dependent on international aid, the resulting vacuum in the military, political and economic sectors will severely impact the Taliban government in Kabul. As the findings illustrate, the freezing of Afghan assets by the United States has severely affected the country's economic stability, coupled with the suspension of international economic assistance since the Taliban took control of the government in Kabul. The increase in poverty and overall economic decline can trigger instability due to the presence of rebel groups, especially the ISIS-K Group which can attract many new members (Taieb, 2021). This emergence will have a profound impact not only on Afghanistan's already weakened security sector due to disintegration and will minimize counter-terrorism efforts, but will also be indirectly connected to the increasing smuggling of drugs such as opium. It should be noted that rebel groups such as ISIS-K will benefit from drug trafficking to support their finances (Kohistani, 2021).

This situation makes it impossible for Russia to allow a power vacuum in Afghanistan that can lead to instability due to radicalization and economic turnover by illegal trade. Judging from the economic situation in Russia, it would make more sense for Russia to provide some degree of assistance in the form of military equipment, compared with the invasion of Afghanistan. It aims to prevent continued instability in the region. Russian sentiment towards the Taliban also tends to be increasingly positive, reinforced by a statement from Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (2021) which describes the Taliban as a rational group and has significant power. The reason for such a pragmatic move by Russia also cannot be separated from the goal of weakening the influence of the West, including Europe and China regarding various issues in the geopolitical sphere. It was previously known that Russia was the only country to keep its embassy in Kabul open during the Taliban conquest. And with that status, Russia has the potential to spread their influence against the Taliban, which is reinforced by the provision of various international dialogues and meetings involving the Taliban. Although it does not necessarily make the world recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, at least this effort has

convinced the international world to help Afghanistan in the economic sector and consider removing the Taliban from the list of extremist organizations (Ostroukh, 2021).

While Russia has embraced the Taliban as the ruling regime in Afghanistan, it remains wary of security risks and doubts the Taliban's promise to fight terrorism. While Russia has promised to eliminate the Taliban from the list of terrorist and extremist organization if several factors are met, Alexander Shein, the Russian ambassador to Israel, said in an interview (2017) that Russian law states that an organization can be considered terrorist if it deliberately commits acts of terror on Russian territory or against its interests Russians abroad, as against installations, embassies offices, and citizens. If this definition is placed in the relationship between Russia and the Taliban, the external threat remains with the Taliban based on the Russian view. This view is evidenced by the response of Russia which held military exercises with the CSTO on the border of Tajikistan with Afghanistan. In particular, the potential threat of attack by the Taliban is much smaller than the influence of the Taliban victory in Afghanistan that can trigger radical Islamic organizations to rise and carry out an uprising in the region. Although Russia has not had any geographical connection with Afghanistan since 1991, "militant Islam" groups remain a concern for Afghanistan, where the Russians do not have sufficient confidence in the solidity of the regime in the Central Asia region as well as in their own capacity to protect the region from such influences (Trenin & Malashenko, 2010).

To maintain their influence in Afghanistan, it is quite possible for Russia to cooperate with non-state actors who have a chance to make the Taliban listen to Russia and make it a key ally for Afghanistan and not China or any other country. Not only have organizations such as ISIS-K become a major threat, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), other militant Islamic groups have moved from Iraq and Syria to northern Afghanistan and are actively operating there. Despite being denied by the Taliban, Putin insisted that these groups could launch an expansion against the independent Commonwealth of nations, leading Russia to suggest that the new government in Afghanistan should immediately take up resistance to the insurgent groups (Taieb, 2021). The possibilities of Russia to cooperate with non-state actors, if only to prevent increased instability are indeed limited. This can not be separated from the 20-years history of highly centralized government has weakened drastically. Ultimately Russia had a little choice but to support the Taliban government to secure stability in Afghanistan (Taieb et al., 2021).

## ***Conclusions***

Russia had a transformed view of the Taliban before and after the group came to power in Afghanistan. Departing from Russia's vigilance in any interaction with Afghanistan following the phenomenon of the Afghan Syndrome, Russia is now become more pro-active considering their national interests are threatened if they are not appropriate in implementing their foreign policy strategy in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Instability in Afghanistan is seen by Russia as having a sustained impact on the backdrop on the border between Central Asia and Afghanistan, making the top priority of Russia is to restore stability in Afghanistan, regardless of who is in power and how. This priority also cannot be separated from the consideration that countries in the Central Asia region such as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are alliances of Russia within the framework of the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union, making it natural for Russia if it wants to ensure security in the region.

The departure of the United States and NATO from Afghanistan is an opportunity for Russia to fill the void left, even if Russia only wants to spread their influence politically rather than through military occupation. There is a history of conflict between Afghanistan and Russia in the past, making Russia's vigilance in relations with the Taliban does not decrease, and it would be very safe if Russia only moves under the auspices of the United Nations. By looking at approaches such as political support and economic assistance, Russia is not only a substitute for the West but also wants to ensure its position as the only guarantor of security in the Central Asia region and a loyal ally to Afghanistan.

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