

BUFFER OR BULWARK? REASSESSING RUSSIA'S CENTRAL ASIAN SECURITY CALCULUS AFTER THE AFGHAN POWER VACUUM

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Abstract

In August 2021, the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO military forces from Afghanistan affected the regional security dilemma. The collapse of the Afghan Republic and the Taliban's swift occupation of the land by the Taliban resulted in new dynamics, especially for Russia. This article posits that Russia's Central Asian security posture in the aftermath of the Afghan power vacuum may best be understood as buffer logic- an attempt to provide security to its eastern flank- or bulwark ambition- an attempt to wield regional leadership. The article claims that security is the main driving force behind Russia's attitude towards Afghanistan. Moscow sees Afghanistan as a potential source of such transnational threats as narcotics trafficking, extremism, and terrorism. There have been concerns about the potential for the spread of instability to Central Asian republics, which have trading interests and established political and military relationships with Russia, due to the presence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). But Russia has tried to adopt a pragmatic approach to engagement with the Taliban government by maintaining diplomatic ties on security issues common to both and extending its security sector and institutional footprint through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In conclusion, the article identifies a combination of buffer and bulwark thinking in Russia's Central Asian Strategy's to maintain regional stability and solidify its strategic presence after its withdrawal.

Article History

Received 02 August 2026
Revised 15 August 2026
Accepted 10 August 2026
Published 11 September 2026

OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Russia, Afghanistan,
Central Asia,
Neorealism, Defensive
Realism, Offensive
Realism, CSTO, ISKP,
Buffer Zone.

1. Introduction

For many decades, Afghanistan has been an important part of regional affairs. Afghanistan is in a strategically important location that connects South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Politically and militarily, it has been a major arena for powers such as the U.S., NATO, and Russia. During the Cold War, the U.S. was an influential actor in Afghanistan's destiny. At the same time, in August 2021, the withdrawal of the U.S./ NATO forces created a huge power vacuum on Afghan Soil. Therefore, the main regional players, Russia, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan, began to play a role in stability and security in Afghanistan.

To Russia, Afghanistan is a key element in its near-abroad security geography. Moscow has traditionally worried about Afghanistan's prospect of instability due to its impact on Central

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Asia. Afghanistan borders Central Asian countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. All of these republics are important to Russia for national security and economic reasons. For example, Tajikistan is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), an organization led by Russia. So, any fluctuation in Afghanistan directly impacts Russia's strategic interests in Central Asia.

Russia got opportunities and challenges with the taking of Kabul by the Taliban just after the departure of the U.S./NATO troops. On one hand, Russia has a chance to gain strategic and diplomatic power. On the other hand, Russia started to worry about terrorism, trafficking in drugs, and cross-border militancy. But this study attempts to respond to a major question: is Moscow's Central Asian policy to be understood as a "security-barrier" methodology? To safeguard some borders from the insurgency that is coming from the South of Afghanistan. Is it the offensive citadel of Strategy's or not? It is seen as extending regional hegemony in the new multipolar world. In this paper, the context of Russia's pivot in security interests, its diplomatic and institutional instruments, and its ties with CARs are interpreted and subjected to analysis based on the neo-realist dichotomy between defensive and offensive realism.

2. Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, this research study is indebted to the theory of international relations (IR) known as Neorealism or Structural Realism. This theory describes state behavior in the absence of a central power with the authority to enforce the rules of law. In this type of anarchy, nations seek to balance their power for their security and survival. According to the father of neorealism, Kenneth Waltz, states generally increase their security in an anarchic system.

In this context, the neorealists were able to interpret Russia's approach to Afghanistan during its post-2021 withdrawal period by U.S. and NATO forces. It was both an opportunity and an obligation for Russia, given its long-term presence and territorial aspirations. Among the key goals are to spread terrorism and extremism to the Central Asian republics, to funnel drugs from Afghanistan to Russia through CARs, and to intrude great powers (China and the U.S.) into the region.

This research paper adopts two types of neorealism to shape the buffer-versus-bulwark debate: Defensive and Offensive Realism, the first focusing on Russia's strategic objectives regarding border security, and the second on Russia's need for more meaningful leadership in the wake of the U.S./NATO withdrawal. Through this lens, Russia's gestures (more military bases in Tajikistan, the Moscow Format, and minor cooperation with the Taliban against ISKP) reveal a pragmatic approach to safeguard its security and regional influence. Neorealism therefore offers a rational paradigm for understanding Russia's attitude as strategic, security-based, and shaped by a competitive international system, rather than ideologically or emotionally motivated.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach to examine Russia's secondary security calculus in Central Asia, in light of the U.S./NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, using purposive sampling. Data were obtained from officials' statements, policy and strategic documents, documented exercises of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and various research papers, expert analyses, and think-tank reports. To highlight how Russia frames and executes its security approach toward Central Asia, the authors use thematic analysis through familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and write-up. The account was compared with other secondary sources to allow for cross-validation of the statements to increase credibility.

4. Russia's Core Security Interests in Central Asia After the Withdrawal

Russia's current stance on Afghanistan after the withdrawal of United States troops from the country in August 2021 is mainly guided by its defense interests. Moscow does not view Afghanistan as simply a neighboring trouble spot, but as a threat that could spill over into neighboring areas. The Afghanistan situation, therefore, is interwoven with Russia's regional security strategies, especially in Central Asia.

Due to their geographical location, the situation in Afghanistan on issues of internal security increasingly threatens Central Asian countries in terms of their political security. Politically and militarily, the Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan are all close to Russia. Tajikistan is part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); as such, Afghanistan's threats cannot be limited to only Russia's strategic interests in the region. Central Asia's security is a key element of Moscow's national defense policy.

4.1 Terrorism and Extremism: The ISKP Factor

Terrorism remains the main security concern for the Russian attitude towards Afghanistan after 2021. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is the IS' most important force in the Afghan theatre, and is seen as the greatest threat to Moscow. Russia does not consider ISKP a local Afghan issue; rather, it considers the group to be a transnational extremist group with regional intentions.

The United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (2022-2024), in its report, said that ISKP has deployed its cells for activities in multiple provinces of Afghanistan despite the Taliban measures and is still recruiting. In several press conferences that took place between 2021 and 2024, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has warned that Afghanistan should not be allowed to become an 'international terrorism nest' and that regional states cannot disregard the danger international terrorist groups pose from Afghan territory.

Russia is also worried that ISKP might seek to spread outside the territory of Afghanistan. The group has publicly demonstrated aggressiveness towards the regimes of the Central Asian countries and Russia, especially after Moscow's military intervention in Syria. This means that Russian security services do not consider ISKP a threat to Russia itself, but rather as a

potential enemy with international extremist aims. Another concern is the possible link between ISKP and militant networks in Central Asia, like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), that could help in crossing the borders.

As a response to Russian anxieties, Moscow has tightened its intelligence cooperation with its Central Asian neighbors. Moscow promotes information exchange on terrorist movements through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the latter of which has a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) that is particularly dedicated to the monitoring of extremists. So far, since 2021, Russia has conducted several joint military exercises at the Afghan border, which the Russian Ministry of Defense claims are designed to counter infiltration by militant groups by local forces.

4.2 Border and Spillover Concerns into Central Asia

Border security and the potential for instability to spill over into Central Asia following the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 are key concerns for Russia. Afghanistan has open and porous borders with Central Asian nations such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The physical geography of the borders makes them difficult to patrol due to mountains and inadequate surveillance equipment, which makes their manipulation easy for any group of militants and criminal gangs.

Stability in the Central Asian region is part and parcel of the Russian Federation's national security. Afghanistan's political stability can directly relate to the weakening of the interior security situation in neighboring countries. Unrest in Central Asia will ultimately impact the domestic security situation for these states, which continue to maintain close military, economic, and political ties with Moscow.

Perhaps most at risk is Tajikistan, as it shares a border more than 1,300 kilometers in length with Afghanistan, which security analysts say is very difficult to protect. In official statements, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu has pointed out that the situation in Afghanistan poses a significant danger to the CSTO's southern borders, noting that the region's militia groups may try to cross Central Asia's borders.

In response to these threats, Russia has focused on strengthening its military ties with Central Asian countries. One of Moscow's most important military bases is the 201st Russian military base in Tajikistan, which is crucial for monitoring developments along the Afghan border. In 2021 and later, Russia and Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan held several joint military drills focused on increasing the security forces' operational presence in preventing domestic threats to the state, including terrorism and illegal cross-border activities. Another priority for Moscow is modernizing frontline infrastructure in the region, and the CSTO is helping Central Asian border forces with technical support and training.

4.3 Counter-Narcotics and the Drug Trafficking Threat

In addition to the threat of terrorism and borders, narcotics trafficking is also an important security topic for Russia in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban seized Kabul in 2021, Afghanistan has historically been one of the largest producers of illicit opium and heroin in the world, influencing territorial security politics.

Drug trafficking thru Central Asian nations such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan is of some interest to Russia as it passes over the Russian border and is considered one of the main avenues going across the border to smuggle Afghan narcotics to Russia and Eastern Europe. In public statements, Russian officials have confirmed that they consider groups involved in trafficking in illegal substances could also cooperate with extremist organizations, facilitating the financing of extremist actions and the supply of weapons and illegal substances.

To draw attention to these challenges, Moscow has expanded its cooperation with CARS in combating drug trafficking, coordinating joint anti-trafficking campaigns at the CSTO via border policing, intelligence sharing, and law enforcement training.

5. Russia and the Central Asian Republics: Convergence and Divergence

Developments after the departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2021 have also dramatically affected the security policies of the Central Asian republics and their relations with Russia. Unrest in Afghanistan can have immediate security consequences for countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, which border the area. Historically connected to Central Asian countries and involved in institutional cooperation with them, Moscow has strong political, economic, and military ties with those countries and monitors events in Afghanistan in coordination with its regional partners.

After the Taliban were restored to power, governments of the Central Asian countries expressed fears of possible trans-border spread of extremist activities from Afghan territory, and ISKP continued to be one of the main concerns. Yet, notwithstanding the common security concerns, there has been variation in the approaches of Central Asian states towards the Taliban authorities.

5.1 Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan: Diverging Security Priorities

Tajikistan has voiced its differences on the legitimacy of the Taliban government while emphasizing the need to establish a representative government based on Afghanistan's ethnically diverse makeup, in view of the presence of ethnically Tajik communities in Afghanistan. Russia has helped Tajikistan build up its army, providing training and technical support to the Tajik border troops via the CSTO and deploying the 201st military base in Tajikistan, which monitors security operations along the Afghan border.

Uzbekistan, however, has been more pragmatic in dealing with the Taliban regime: it has been in touch with Afghan officials to help coordinate economic ties, and it has regarded Afghanistan as a potential route for Central Asian-South Asian infrastructure development.

Turkmenistan's policy has been one of low-profile relations with the Taliban government; however, its security interests are linked to energy projects, such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline, that will be affected by Afghanistan's stability.

Russia has to maneuver all these diverging policy moves by the Central Asian states. While promoting efforts to boost regional cooperation in countering terrorists under the CSTO, Moscow recognizes the importance of individual economic cooperation pursued by the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Turkmenistan. The process of convergence and divergence between Russia and Central Asian republics can thus be understood to this way. Although security interests have driven them toward collaboration, diplomatic policy has shaped regional responses, and this is one of the greatest difficulties in Russia's Central Asian calculations for the post-2021 period.

6. Institutional Tools: CSTO Security Posture and Military Presence

Among the institutional instruments Russia has to neutralize security risks emanating from Afghanistan, one of the most important is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). CSTO is an association of countries in the region that works to ensure security: Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Tajikistan shares its frontiers with Afghanistan, so its stability is closely tied to Afghanistan's.

Russia has been pushing for increased participation of CSTO defense forces in Central Asia since the departure of U.S. troops in 2021. The CSTO welcomes new member states and adjusts its Strategy's by naming collective security in the CSTO region as one of the organization's primary objectives; it highlights issues of terrorism, extremism, and border crossings.

Russia's military base in Tajikistan, the 201st, plays a significant role in patrolling the Afghanistan border and is thought to be one of the largest Russian military bases abroad. Russian military officials report in official statements from the Russian Defense Ministry that Russian military units stationed in Tajikistan strengthen the CSTO's southern flank. As of 2021, Russia has been conducting joint military exercises with CSTO member countries in the border region with Afghanistan involving counterterrorism scenarios and border protection. The Collective Rapid Response Forces of the CSTO have likewise been mobilized and put on a higher state of alert in view of the Taliban coming to power. They can act quickly to emerging security threats in CSTO member states.

Russia has supported the CSTO by deploying military equipment and providing technical assistance to upgrade the security infrastructure in border areas and address gaps in the system. Moreover, the CSTO acts as a forum for exchanging information among its members on militant groups and trafficking networks to boost the effectiveness of anti-terrorist efforts. However, CSTO programs have their limitations, as member states' political priorities may affect their joint security measures, and the lack of resources might limit CSTO forces' response.

7. Buffer Logic: The Defensive Realist Reading

The Russian approach to Afghanistan since the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2021 bears several characteristics of defensive realism. Defensive realism suggests that states do not seek power maximization for its own sake; rather, they seek security, which is difficult to maintain in a strategic environment, especially in an anarchic international system.

Russia is concerned about Afghanistan as a potential source of insecurity. Moscow's primary concern is that instability in Central Asia should not spread into the region. Politically and militarily, Russia is allied with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, so it wants to protect itself from any threat arising from Afghanistan that could directly affect Russia's regional security environment and, in turn, the region's overall stability.

Moscow sees Central Asia as a safe zone from which to shield itself from Afghanistan's turmoil. It is important to have stability in the buffer area, which is essential to Russia's defense. That's why, since 2021, Moscow has expedited its military cooperation with Central Asian countries. The military exercises, which are held within the CSTO framework, are designed to boost countries' ability to defend against the terrorism threat and should reflect anti-terrorism operations and border security scenarios, which suggests that Russia is wary, in particular, of the spread of militants to its neighbors.

Russia's long-standing military presence at the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan plays a crucial role in monitoring developments along the Afghan border, and Russian forces in the region can boost local defense strength, the Russian Ministry of Defense said. Russia also provides technical cooperation and training schemes aimed at modernizing border security in the Central Asian republics, particularly at weak border points.

Similarly, the inclusion of diplomatic ties with the Taliban government demonstrates a defensive realism between Russia and the Taliban. There is a pragmatic method to controlling risks: Moscow tends to maintain its communication lines to ensure that Afghan territory isn't turned into a base for the perpetration of transnational terrorism. Moreover, Russia has been active in making sure that daily there are no extremists, such as ISKP, who are given a chance to grow, as their very presence poses a direct threat to regional stability. Hence, this dimension of Russia's Afghan and Central Asian policy could be called defensive, designed to maintain rather than expand—Moscow sees buffer logic as a key component of its strategic approach to security in Central Asia.

8. Bulwark Ambitions: The Offensive Realist Reading

Russia's reasoning in Central Asia can even be considered to be a distillation of multiple elements of defensive realism. Still, some elements can be accounted for in the framework of offensive realism. Offensive realism is based on the assumption that states strive to optimize their influence to gain an improved position in the international system. States need to try to shape the region's trajectory where possible in an anarchic environment.

In that year, after the U.S./NATO troops departed the country, a vacuum of power was created in Afghanistan and Afghanistan's neighboring region. This allowed regional actors to exert influence through diplomatic means; for Russia, it was a chance to defend its interests in Eurasia's security. Diplomatic efforts have taken an aggressive tone, with Moscow hosting the Moscow Format Dialogue to bring Afghan officials and other regional stakeholders together. In this way, Moscow will be able to take a mediation role in the region and receive more support and recognition around Afghanistan and its affairs, which will also grant Moscow more visibility and presence in Afghanistan in the first place.

Furthermore, Russia's involvement in regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) suggests intentions to shape the security environment, including training events and intelligence sharing within the SCO context alongside combating terrorism. Further, Russia has stepped up its military cooperation with the Central Asian countries since 2021; the Russian military drills on the border with Afghanistan demonstrate its commitment to regional security but also serve to enhance its role in regional security structures.

Moreover, Russia is trying to curb the domination of other great powers in its strategic region. The Kyrgyz Republic is part of the wider Eurasian geopolitical region, so advances in Afghanistan will also be linked to a continuation of Russian influence in the region. By promoting multilateral cooperation mechanisms, Moscow tries to shape the region's governance model to reduce external intervention by providing regional solutions to Afghan issues. But Russia's stance on Afghanistan is cautious; given its history of military involvement and its status as a less resource-rich state, Moscow is not enthusiastic about these developments. Instead, it pursues its interests through diplomacy and other forms of cooperation, meaning Russia's bulwark efforts are carried out through institutional and diplomatic engagement rather than military expansion.

9. Conclusion: Buffer and Bulwark Together

The withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 has reshaped the strategic landscape in the region. The uncertainty enveloping the return of the Taliban to power created some pressure for regional players to reconsider their diplomatic and security strategies. The answer seems to be that security issues primarily guide Moscow in its "current security thinking" regarding Central Asia. Moscow is concerned about Afghanistan because it sees it as a scene of transnational threats like terrorism, extremism, and smuggling of narcotics, which can directly affect the Central Asian states – Russia's closest political and military allies.

ISKP has been one of the major concerns for Russian policies, and the reports of the United Nations Security Council Monitoring Team show that extremist groups have operational capability en masse in various provinces of Afghanistan. Another thorny issue is narcotics smuggling from Afghanistan; there are also organized crime and public health issues in Russian society connected with the northern delivery route, which goes through Central Asia.

Russia has adopted a pragmatic attitude towards the Taliban government. While Moscow has not yet formally recognized the Taliban government, it maintains contacts with the government to tackle security issues of common concern. This moves towards eventual cooperation (with conditions attached) to protect Afghanistan from being a haven for extremist groups. This article concludes that Russia's Central Asian calculations are neither purely buffer logic nor purely bulwark ambition. Indeed, it is both defensive—it aims to keep instability from spilling across Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and, through these two neighbors, into Russia—as well as offensive—it takes advantage of the power vacuum that has been left behind by the withdrawal of U.S. forces to cement its military basing further, to drive military cooperation with the CSTO and SCO, and as the main player in the Moscow Format, to broker Afghan stability in the process. The buffer and the bulwark are thus two sides of the same policy: Central Asia must be protected and, therefore, can be useful, but if it is useful, it must be kept protected.

10. Policy Recommendations

Drawing on the results of this article, several recommendations can be made to reduce the confusion and insecurities in Russian security calculations for Central Asia in the post-withdrawal period.

To begin with, Russia needs to maintain diplomatic contacts with the leaders of the Taliban movement, pursuing the principle of “conditional cooperation”, while continuing to press through positive communication with the Afghan government to maintain its commitments in the sphere of counterterrorism and border security.

Second, it is crucial to consolidate cooperation with Central Asian countries to find solutions to security risks emanating from Afghan soil. The CSTO should be used to organize joint military exercises and intelligence exchanges, as coordinated operations by regional military forces could help prevent infiltration by militant groups across zones.

Third, multilateral cooperation in the region should be enhanced through organizational bodies such as the SCO. When it comes to intelligence sharing and counterterrorism cooperation under the auspices of the SCO, they can contribute to easing the situation in the region; Russia should encourage joint policies by member countries in combating extremist threats.

4. Special attention should be given to counter-narcotics activities that have a bearing on the narcotics networks that operate on the northern route, and Russia should facilitate the leasing of law enforcement and border security capacity building.

Fifth, regional dialogue processes, such as the Moscow Format Dialogue, should be strengthened to enhance policy coordination and conflict management through regular dialogue.

Lastly, Russia should make a distinction between buffer and bulwark policies by not forcing blanket military and institutional involvement in Central Asia, where policies towards the Taliban differ from country to country, from Tajikistan's reservations to Uzbekistan's pragmatic approach and to Turkmenistan's "no-profile" participation.

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