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RUSSIA'S PERSPECTIVE ON AFGHANISTAN: AN ANALYTICAL COMMENTARY ON AN ARTICLE



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



RUSSIA'S PERSPECTIVE ON AFGHANISTAN: AN ANALYTICAL COMMENTARY ON AN ARTICLE

Sergei Shoigu, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation and former Minister of Defense, is the highest-ranking Russian official to have authored an article entitled “*Afghanistan: The Challenging Path Toward Stability*”, published on 29 August 2025 (7 Sunbula 1404 in the Afghan calendar) in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, a state-run Russian newspaper.

Shoigu's article is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it has been written by one of Russia's most senior security officials, and therefore naturally reflects the broader perspective of Russia's security institutions and, more generally, the Kremlin's official stance on Afghanistan. Second, it appeared in a highly reputable state newspaper, which itself underscores the importance of the issue within Russian media and policy circles. Third, the article comes at a time when Russia is the first and thus far the only country to have formally recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, nearly two months before the article's publication.

Given these three points, a number of questions arise: How accurate are Shoigu's assessments when compared with Afghanistan's realities on the ground? And why would one of the Kremlin's most senior officials write an article on Afghanistan with a predominantly security-oriented and somewhat negative outlook? More importantly, what objectives might Russia be seeking to achieve through such a narrative framing?

AN OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLE'S CONTENT

At the outset of his article, Shoigu sets forth a central argument that clearly reflects Russia's overarching assessment of the West's role in Afghanistan: “*The full responsibility for Afghanistan's post-conflict reconstruction must lie with Western countries.*”

Broadly speaking, the article addresses three major themes.

First, Shoigu underscores what he terms the “disgraceful and chaotic” withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in August 2021, at one point even using the term “flight.” Early in the article, he writes: “*Four years later, the shocking images of the disgraceful flight of one of the most advanced, powerful, and technologically equipped armies in the world from this South Asian country [Afghanistan] remain fresh in people's minds. The uncoordinated and ill-planned withdrawal, which resulted in civilian casualties, embodied the complete failure of the Biden administration's Afghanistan policy and epitomized the chaos that dominated U.S. foreign policy under the Democrats.*” This passage was illustrated with a photo of a U.S. military plane taxiing on the runway as crowds of Afghans ran alongside it. The timing of the article's publication—coinciding with the fourth anniversary of the U.S. withdrawal—appears deliberately chosen for propagandistic effect, allowing this senior Russian official to once again portray the decline of U.S. power and credibility before Russian and global public opinion.



Second, Shoigu refers to his own visit to Kabul in November 2024 and his assessment of the Islamic Emirate's policies. According to him, Kabul recognizes that constructive engagement—particularly with Russia can be achieved through political dialogue. He further concludes that Afghan authorities are aware that ensuring security is a decisive factor for economic development and attracting foreign investment.

Third, the issue of narcotics occupies a prominent place in the article. Shoigu reviews the expansion of narcotics cultivation in Afghanistan since the 1980s, drawing on statistics from international sources, including the United Nations. He notes: *“Opium production in Afghanistan has been the country’s largest illegal economic activity since the 1980s, reaching a record 4,565 tons in 1999 (70% of global opium). In 2000, the Islamic Emirate banned poppy cultivation, sharply reducing production (to 185 tons in 2001). After the U.S. invasion in 2001, production surged again to 3,400 tons, spreading to nearly all provinces. Under the Obama administration, production peaked at 9,000 tons in 2017—43 times higher than before the U.S. presence—and was concentrated largely in NATO-controlled areas. After the Islamic Emirate’s return to power in 2021, poppy cultivation and trafficking were again prohibited. Consequently, in 2023, cultivation declined by 95% (to about 1,000 hectares) and opium production dropped to 333 tons. Today, 20 provinces are free of poppy cultivation, and regular operations are carried out against drug trafficking. This reduction has resulted in a significant fall in heroin seizures in Russia from 1.4 tons to 319 kilograms—since 2021.”*

The article thus highlights, above all, the surge in narcotics cultivation during the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, implicitly suggesting that Washington deliberately tolerated or even facilitated the drug trade for two purposes: first, as a source of profit, and second, as a weapon against rival states such as Russia. Shoigu adds that despite the Emirate's success in reducing opium production, Afghanistan now faces new challenges. In his view, the country has seen a sharp rise in the production of synthetic opioids, including highly potent and deadly substances such as *nitazenes*. He cites a 75% increase in methamphetamine seizures in Afghanistan and neighboring states in 2024, while also noting that the primary production hub for such substances appears to be shifting toward the so-called “Golden Triangle,” the borderlands of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos.

Finally, Shoigu addresses what he views as the critical issue of terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan. Drawing a connection between narcotics production and terrorism, he writes: *“According to our assessment, around 20 international terrorist groups with more than 23,000 fighters are active in Afghanistan. The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) poses the main threat, with bases in the country’s east and north. Kabul is conducting military operations against these groups, but Western sanctions hinder the effectiveness of this struggle. The transfer of militants into Afghanistan is aimed at destabilizing the region and creating*



insecurity along the borders of Russia, China, and Iran. There is reason to believe that the intelligence services of several Western countries stand behind these actions. Instability near Russia, China, and Iran is being fueled by extremist groups hostile to the Islamic Emirate. It is also evident that Western powers, having lost their positions in Afghanistan, are seeking to reestablish NATO's military infrastructure in the region. The effort to return NATO to the area is occurring despite official declarations of non-recognition of the Islamic Emirate, as evidenced by repeated diplomatic visits to Kabul. In reality, the West is maneuvering to retain influence in Afghanistan and to use terrorism as a tool of pressure against its geopolitical rivals."

ANALYSIS OF THE ARTICLE'S CONTENT

The arguments presented by Sergei Shoigu, as Secretary of the Russian Security Council, cannot in any way be regarded as the personal opinions of a single individual. Rather, the points raised in his article clearly reflect the broader position of the Kremlin—extending up to President Vladimir Putin himself—on Afghanistan.

Shoigu's insistence that the West bears full responsibility for Afghanistan's reconstruction conveys two major messages. First, from Moscow's perspective, Afghanistan, after twenty costly years of U.S. involvement—at an expense of nearly two trillion dollars—has been left in ruins. In other words, under the pretext of rebuilding Afghanistan, Washington entered the country, but its two decades of presence resulted in devastation. Second, by reiterating this view, Russia signals that it assumes no responsibility for Afghanistan's reconstruction, thereby shifting the blame for any future difficulties back to Western capitals.

The second major point acknowledged by Shoigu is the Islamic Emirate's foreign policy of engagement. Since its reestablishment, the Emirate has announced that its external relations will be guided by positive interaction with other states, and has sought to implement this in practice. Although many countries are already aware of this orientation, the fact that such a position is publicized by a senior Russian official, to bolster the Emirate's political standing in international arenas.

On the narcotics issue, Shoigu's perspective is somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, he praises the Emirate's policies in curbing the cultivation and production of agricultural narcotics. On the other hand, he portrays Afghanistan as a hub for synthetic drug production, basing this claim on the rise in seizures of synthetic narcotics in neighboring states. Yet, if the Emirate has succeeded in reducing agricultural drug production, how could it simultaneously be incapable of suppressing synthetic drug production? And if Shoigu implies that the Emirate itself is complicit, this again reflects an inconsistency. Moreover, his reasoning is questionable: higher levels of synthetic drug seizures in neighboring countries do not necessarily prove that production is occurring within Afghanistan. Field realities in Afghanistan indicate that the



Emirate actively combats the production of all forms of narcotics, a fact that can be observed directly on the ground. It is more plausible that Shoigu's assertions rely on indirect sources, with figures that may serve political purposes rather than reflecting objective reality.

Regarding the presence of terrorist groups, Shoigu simply reiterates claims that have circulated for years. For a long time, various sources have alleged that more than twenty terrorist groups operate in Afghanistan, yet no credible evidence has ever been produced. Furthermore, over these years, no tangible activity has been observed from any of these groups either inside or outside Afghanistan—apart from ISIS, which is a separate case. This naturally raises the question: if twenty such groups exist, what exactly are they doing in Afghanistan? Simply “eating and sleeping”? In truth, these claims are largely hollow, serving political ends rather than reflecting concrete realities.

As for ISIS, it is indeed a transnational organization with activity across many countries. In Afghanistan, it was highly active under the previous government. However, following the return of the Emirate to power, a determined campaign was launched against ISIS, dismantling its core cells and organizational centers. A practical indicator of this is the group's shift in tactics from territorial control to sporadic attacks. The marked decline in ISIS operations in recent years further attests to its significant weakening in Afghanistan—a point that Shoigu himself partially concedes.

One notable aspect of Shoigu's commentary on terrorism is his attribution of blame to Western states. According to him, the Emirate's fight against ISIS has been hindered both by Western sanctions and by the influx of militants into Afghanistan from abroad. His point regarding sanctions is valid: Western restrictions have not only constrained counterterrorism efforts but have also inflicted harm on nearly every sector of Afghan society. However, while Western intelligence services may have played a role in fostering extremist groups, Shoigu's suggestion that the Emirate has been ineffective in combating terrorism downplays its actual efforts. This either overlooks or misinterprets on-the-ground realities, repeating earlier analytical misjudgments.

RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES IN RAISING THESE ISSUES

Regardless of whether Shoigu's statements reflect reality or exaggeration, they clearly encapsulate Russia's prevailing perspective on Afghanistan. The question, then, is what Moscow seeks to achieve by articulating such views.

The **first objective** is to undermine the image of Western powers in Afghanistan. Although the West's record in Afghanistan is hardly commendable, ending with a humiliating withdrawal after two decades of war, this does not mean that Western involvement in Afghanistan has



ceased. Rather, the West continues to pursue its interests in the country through other means and newer instruments. While Russia's criticism of the West is in some respects justified, Moscow's ultimate aim is not to serve Afghanistan's interests but to advance its own. By magnifying Western failures and misconduct, Russia attempts to distract attention from, or downplay, its own actions in other arenas, most notably in Ukraine.

The **second objective** is linked to Russia's emphasis on narcotics production and its portrayal of Afghanistan as a hub for terrorism. By invoking the specter of drug trafficking and "twenty terrorist groups," Moscow seeks to alarm the states of Central Asia, pushing them to rely on Russia's military and intelligence apparatus for protection from perceived Afghan threats. In doing so, Russia legitimizes and justifies its military presence in the region.

A **third objective** is to deepen security and intelligence cooperation with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. By raising these issues—while also, at the conclusion of Shoigu's article, expressing Russia's readiness to assist Afghanistan—Moscow signals its desire for closer bilateral ties. Russia's recognition of the Emirate can likewise be seen as a political concession designed to secure greater cooperation. Shoigu's reference to restoring Afghanistan's role within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization further illustrates Moscow's intent to draw the Emirate more firmly into its strategic orbit.

CONCLUSION

An examination of Sergei Shoigu's article on Afghanistan reveals that while he addresses certain realities, his analysis is far more characterized by narrative framing and political posturing. It is evident that this Russian official, in line with Moscow's broader global, regional, and Afghan objectives, has deliberately engaged in such framing. Beyond this rhetoric, Russia's primary aim is to draw the Islamic Emirate closer to itself while distancing it from the West.

In fact, Russia views Afghanistan's current situation as a strategic opportunity to reduce Western influence, employing a variety of tactics to align Kabul more firmly with Moscow. For the Islamic Emirate, this Russian interest provides a valuable opportunity, enhancing its bargaining power vis-à-vis Russia's Western rivals. Nevertheless, prudence is essential. The Emirate must carefully navigate relations, maintaining a calibrated distance between this eastern power and Western states. By pursuing a balanced and intelligent policy of engagement, the Emirate can maximize available opportunities in support of Afghanistan's stability and economic development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the content of Shoigu's article, which reflects Russia's official stance toward Afghanistan, the following recommendations are offered:



1. The Islamic Emirate's media apparatus should play a more active role in documenting and publicizing the realities of Afghanistan, particularly its prohibition of narcotics cultivation and production, as well as the absence of terrorist groups in the country.
2. While maintaining equilibrium between East and West, the Islamic Emirate should strategically utilize Russia's capacities in areas of shared interest to advance Afghanistan's national interests.

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