

Analysis

Why Russia Is Cooperating With the West in Afghanistan

By Dick Krickus, Washington

Abstract

In spite of fears that the West is exploiting UN mandated military operations in Afghanistan to secure control of vital hydro-carbon and pipeline assets in Central Asia, the Kremlin has joined the American-NATO forces in an attempt to crush the jihadists in that war-torn country. A Taliban return to power would facilitate the flow of heroin from Afghanistan to Russia; and the jihadists would promote insurgencies throughout Central Asia and use it as a pathway into Russia proper, where foreign jihadists already are encouraging armed uprisings, terrorist strikes and assassinations in the North Caucasus. As a consequence, Russia has offered modest assistance to the American-NATO military venture; for example, it has provided an air and land corridor to supply the troops in the war zone. In addition to denying the Taliban a return to power, the Kremlin hopes to be an active player in shaping Afghanistan's post-war strategic environment. In the meantime, it is encouraging NATO to give China and other powers in the region the opportunity to help pacify Afghanistan through existing institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Extending a Hand

While relentless in complaining about NATO's eastward advance to their borders, Russian authorities have supported the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in its drive to prevent the Taliban from returning to power in Afghanistan. At the July 2009 Moscow summit, Presidents Dmitri Medvedev and Barak Obama pledged to stabilize Afghanistan by fighting terrorism and stemming the flow of narcotics from the embattled country. While the alliance wages armed conflict against the jihadists, Russia—still suffering from “Afghanistan fatigue”—has offered non-lethal assistance to Hamid Karzai's government. Moscow has provided intelligence, trained anti-drug personnel, helped rebuild the country's dilapidated infrastructure, and has sold the Afghani army weapons, helicopters and communications equipment.

The transit of non-lethal and lethal supplies to ISAF via air and land corridors through Russia to bases in Afghanistan has been Russia's most highly publicized contribution to the effort. The Russian supply route complements the existing dangerous route that involves a land corridor from the Karachi port through the narrow Pakistani Khyber Pass into Afghanistan. Jihadists have attacked convoys carrying supplies over this route, killing many truck drivers and destroying a significant amount of cargo and numerous vehicles.

In particular, Russia has provided air and land corridors as part of the Northern Distribution Network. About 2 flights a day carry supplies to NATO units in Afghanistan and the deal provides for a total of 4,500 flights to be conducted on an annual basis. Furthermore,

the U.S. transit base at Manas in Kyrgyzstan provides most of the jet fuel that U.S. aircraft use in Afghanistan and about 30,000 U.S. troops have passed through it on their deployment to the war zone.

Simultaneously, extensive cargo moves through Latvian ports, across Russia, via Termez in Kazakhstan and ultimately onto Afghanistan. Black Sea ports are also connected to this network. U.S. officials have estimated that by the spring of 2010 about one-quarter of the alliance's non-lethal supplies was transported in this fashion. The annual savings as a consequence exceeds \$100 million annually.

Russia is prepared to provide Afghanistan with helicopters, arms and ammunition that its army can deploy in its struggle against the Taliban albeit through commercial rather than pro-bono deals. In addition, it is training Afghan police and providing intelligence that has a bearing on military operations throughout the war zone.

Critics Object to Russian Policy

Some members of Russia's military and political elite oppose helping Western operations in Afghanistan. They deem it ill-advised for several compelling reasons:

Military Intervention In Afghanistan Has Enhanced Western Influence in Central Asia: The Americans and Europeans covet Central Asia's energy assets and the pipelines that carry the region's oil and gas to international customers. Their intrusive military campaign may thwart efforts to integrate the region's hydro-carbon wealth into Russia's economic modernization drive and its campaign to re-establish hegemony throughout

Eurasia. Thinking along these lines explains why some in the Kremlin favor closing the Manas Transit Center that the Americans operate in Kyrgyzstan.

An American Defeat In Afghanistan Will Enhance Russian Security: A setback in Afghanistan will force the “arrogant” Americans to acknowledge their declining political and military influence, and to reconcile security disputes with Russia over NATO enlargement, the missile defense system, and Russia’s claim that it has special spheres of influence in the former Soviet space that includes Central Asia.

A NATO Setback Will Enhance The Prospects for a New European Security System: Should the NATO operation in Afghanistan fail, the Europeans will have to acknowledge the futility of “out-of-area” operations. That conclusion would encourage them to embrace the new European security system that President Dmitri Medvedev has advocated.

Obama’s Exit from Afghanistan Is Only a Matter of Time: Obama’s grand strategy for Afghanistan rests on achieving daunting security and economic goals that are not politically sustainable over the long run. The Taliban will neutralize the West’s military might by simply avoiding major head-to-head battles and await the day that public outcries to “bring the boys home” compel American and European leaders to do just that. What is more, the highly touted development component of the Obama plan represents nothing less than nation building in one of the most backward societies on earth. Given the huge and expanding U.S. deficit, how plausible is it that any administration in Washington will pour billions of dollars into Afghanistan over many years to get that difficult task done? Why help the Americans then in what is a lost cause?

Leaders Back Cooperation

These objections cannot be easily dismissed, but Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitri Medvedev have endorsed Russian-Western cooperation in Afghanistan for a number of vital strategic reasons.

Enhancing Russian Security: Afghanistan is the primary source of what many Russians deem their most devastating social problem: drug addiction. The UN reports that Russian addicts consume almost the same amount of heroin that all of Europe consumes and a disproportionate number of drug addicts who die from substance abuse worldwide live in Russia. The trend lines are soaring upward and show no signs of leveling out. Consequently, Victor Ivanov, the head of Russia’s Federal Drug Control Agency, has urged NATO to embrace an aggressive poppy eradication program in

Afghanistan. (NATO has rejected this solution since so many Afghans depend upon poppy production.) Under renewed Taliban rule, the flood of narcotics would likely surge and it is imperative that heroin supply lines from Afghanistan to Russia be interdicted. It is noteworthy that even after the awful bomb attacks in the Moscow metro, polls show that Russians fear drug addiction more than terrorism, with 65 percent naming drugs and 60 percent citing terrorism.

Turning to the political-military threat, a Taliban return to power in Kabul would have dire consequences for Russia. The triumphant jihadists would direct their attention to Russia’s 20 million Muslim residents in a “struggle for religious liberation” from the rule of “unbelievers.” More to the point, for some time now, foreign terrorists have provided weapons and trained anti-government fighters in Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan and other parts of the North Caucasus. As a consequence, there have been mounting deaths resulting from armed combat, terrorism and assassinations throughout the region. At the same time, the jihadists have carried the fight deep into Russia proper as evidenced by the St. Petersburg train and Moscow subways attacks. Moreover, the content of their propaganda no longer carries the message of national independence but Islamic jihad. The domestic fighters are serious about installing an Islamic Caliphate in Russia and even if that goal exceeds their capabilities, they can create daunting security problems for Moscow. In addition to guerrilla warfare and acts of brutal terrorism, they can destroy rail lines, power plants, energy pipelines and other vital infrastructure crucial to Russia as it strives to grow and diversify its economy.

It is against this backdrop that Russian officials and analysts have concluded that Russia must “upgrade” its cooperation with Europe and America in fighting Islamic jihadism wherever it appears in Eurasia.

Safeguarding Central Asia: In referring to Central Asia, Dmitri Trenin and Alexey Malashenko have observed: “Russia fears a rise in Islamic radicalism across the region and a revival of rebel activity in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. It does not have sufficient confidence in the solidity of the Central Asian regimes or in its own capacity to insulate the region from the influence of a victorious Taliban.”

The Fergana Valley knits together Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and is home for about half of their collective population. Should the Taliban regain power in Afghanistan, they are likely to promote insurgencies throughout that area and compromise the security of pro-Russian governments there. Needless

to say, such mayhem would have a deleterious impact upon the extraction and delivery of local hydro-carbons to Russian companies who see them as more or less a Russian resource. It is prudent, therefore, for Russia to provide whatever assistance that it can muster to promote an outcome in Afghanistan that does not place Central Asia at risk.

Promoting Links with Regional Powers and Organizations: While cooperating with NATO in Afghanistan, Russia must closely manage relations with neighboring states like Pakistan, Iran and China. It also seeks to develop fledgling security organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the top priority, or the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a secondary priority. The Kremlin has urged Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to expand NATO's relations with both bodies.

Russian defense analysts cite Pakistan as an existential threat to stability in the region. Fedor Lukyanov, the editor of *Russia in Global Affairs*, has observed, "The chances of irresponsible radical forces acceding to power there are probably quite high." And while "Something extraordinary must happen to Pakistan for nuclear weapons to end up in somebody's hands...", this outcome "is possible."

Analysts who think in such sober terms cannot take comfort in the observation that a Taliban victory in Afghanistan would embolden jihadists in Pakistan. Even if they do not achieve power in Pakistan, they can foster widespread instability in a country that possesses nuclear weapons and fissile material that may wind-up in the hands of individuals who might be willing to use them—perhaps not against adversaries in Pakistan but in neighboring India, or Russia. The prospect that this worst-case scenario materializes may be low, but the loss of lives could be high and the fall-out from this tragedy could spawn a nuclear exchange between Pakistan and India.

Russian officials continue to look with greater favor toward India than Pakistan since the latter played a crucial role in the Soviet Union's defeat in Afghanistan while during the Cold War and today India enjoys harmonious relations with Moscow. The Kremlin welcomes efforts on the part of India to support Afghanistan in its fight with jihadists who have killed Indian troops in Kashmir and innocent civilians in Mumbai. Delhi also has become a major customer for Russia's military hardware.

Like Russia, China has had to cope with a restive Muslim minority that occupies the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. In a bid for independence, Uighurs

have resorted to armed conflict. At the same time, China has extensive commercial ties to Central Asia—mainly seeking access to its hydro-carbon wealth—and covets Afghanistan's mineral assets and its ability to provide a pathway to the Indian Ocean.

The fight against a common enemy then is a bond between Beijing and Moscow and it contributes to Russia's campaign to work with China to balance mutual interests against American influence in Central Asia and the Far East. Through the SCO, Moscow hopes to cooperate with China (and India and Iran as well) in challenging American hegemony in Central Asia and beyond, while at the same time cooperating in the struggle against the jihadists.

While Russia's engagement with the Americans may cause some concern in Beijing, like their counterparts in Moscow, the Chinese Communist Party leadership welcomes—with reservations—a successful American-led effort to deny the Taliban a new strategic base in Afghanistan. There are rumors in Washington that the Chinese actually offered President Bush troops to achieve that outcome, but he refused them because his Republican base would find such a prospect abhorrent. Also, the Chinese government has endorsed sanctions against Tehran for not complying with UN demands that it halt efforts to develop a nuclear arsenal, but they have yet to include the "bite" that U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton favors.

Moscow, of course, sees relations with Iran from a different and broader strategic perspective: in addition to economic incentives, Russia desires to maintain harmonious relations with Tehran to enhance its image with its own Muslims as well as those abroad. Officials in the Kremlin likewise remind their American counterparts that Iran could play a positive role in preventing the Taliban's return to power and in stabilizing post-war Afghanistan.

Re-Setting Relations with the West: Arguably, Russian-American cooperation in Afghanistan is the most important test in the near term of how well Washington and Moscow have reset their relations. Furthermore, Russian cooperation with NATO is consistent with Medvedev's call for a new European Security system.

Participating in Post-War Afghanistan: One of the major reasons why Moscow wants to play a role in advancing a positive outcome in Afghanistan is the expectation that it will have a voice in shaping its post-war architecture. If Russia had to sit on the sidelines, it would have to accept whatever outcome the victorious powers dictated.

So, while there may be some Russian strategists who counsel their political masters to make mischief in Afghanistan by not cooperating with alliance forces there, those who favor it have more prudent calculations on their side.

Conclusion

When all is said and done, Russian security analysts cannot forget the following compelling fact: American and NATO forces are targeting the very jihadists that feed the needs of Russian drug addicts; that have provided armed assistance to insurgents in the North Caucasus; and that threaten pro-Russian regimes throughout Central Asia. In particular, Central Asia represents a vast region that is ripe for jihadist intervention, constitutes a pathway into Russia and simultaneously threatens the Kremlin's energy-driven economic development strategy. The outcome of the struggle in Afghanistan then is certain to have an impact upon Eurasia's future.

About the Author

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Recommended Reading

- Dmitri Trenin and Alexey Malashenko, "Afghanistan: A View from Moscow", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010.
- Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas M. Sanderson, "The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan," Center For Strategic and International Studies, January 10, 2010.
- Samuel Charap, "Assessing the 'Reset' and the Next Steps for U.S. Russia Policy," Center for American Progress, April 2010.

It is against this backdrop that Russia has powerful incentives to support ISAF troops that are seeking to prevent the Taliban's return in Afghanistan. This is why it has provided air and land corridors as part of the Northern Distribution Network. The Kremlin anticipates that this cooperation will earn it a place at the post-war negotiating table thereby enabling it to determine the fate of Afghanistan and shape the future of the entire region.

Foreign Minister Lavrov's recent report favoring a tilt toward the West is consistent with Moscow's support for the ISAF, but prudence dictates that Russian strategists provide an answer to the disconcerting question: what measures must Moscow take should the Obama plan fail to deny the Taliban a return to power in Afghanistan? That outcome would force it, and to a lesser degree NATO, to confront a monumental security problem.