

Analysis

The Afghan Problem from a Russian Perspective

By Victor Korgun, Moscow

Abstract

Afghanistan is once again a key foreign policy concern for Russia. The unstable situation in Afghanistan, and in particular the presence of illegal narcotics, Islamic extremism and corruption, threatens the stability of Russia and its strategic allies in Central Asia. To address these challenges, Russia is seeking to play an increasingly active role in the reconstruction and stabilization of Afghanistan at bilateral, regional and international levels. Therefore, Russia and the West have a common interest in Afghanistan, and Moscow is more than happy to work collaboratively with the Western-led international efforts in Afghanistan.

Recent History of Russian-Afghan Relations

For many decades, Afghanistan was a highly significant element within Soviet foreign policy. Moscow provided huge economic and military assistance to Afghanistan and from the late 1970's became embroiled in a war, which ultimately contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Following the break-up, Afghanistan was relegated to a peripheral interest for Russia. During this period, a civil war, or rather a power struggle, took place in Afghanistan between the various Mujahedin factions, leading to the disintegration of Afghanistan and subsequently to the emergence of the Taliban military and political movement. After the Taliban regime was removed by the NATO operation "Enduring Freedom" in 2001, a situation emerged in which a reconstruction of Afghanistan and a transition to peaceful democratic development was possible. As a consequence, opportunities also appeared for the restoration of traditional good-neighborly relations between Russia and Afghanistan.

After Operation "Enduring Freedom"

The Russian leadership actively supported the NATO counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan, even deciding not to object to the deployment of NATO forces in military bases in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. As part of the wider international support effort for this operation, the Russian government provided prompt humanitarian assistance to the Afghan population. Following the dismantling of the Taliban regime, the head of the interim administration, Hamid Karzai and other leaders of the country, paid an official visit to Moscow in the spring of 2002. During this visit, the two countries signed 17 agreements concerning the construction and restoration of economic infrastructure, energy projects, delivery of agricultural machines and equipment, industrial equipment and various types of modern techniques.

However, the two countries have not been able to effectively implement all of these agreements because Russian-Afghan relations are dependent on a complex array of factors: firstly, the situation in Afghanistan, secondly, Russia's relations with leading Western countries, primarily the US, and thirdly, the changing situation in the region of Central Asia and the wider world. In spite of the slow progress in bilateral relations, Moscow continues to support the international community's efforts towards fighting terrorism and Islamic extremism in Afghanistan and the region. Russia has also assisted the Afghan people in their efforts towards the reconstruction of their ruined economy and social sphere. Although Russia has only limited economic capacity to support Afghanistan, Moscow has attempted to make a contribution, a significant illustration of which is the remittance of Afghan debts to Russia, amounting to \$11.5 billion.

Russian Interests in Afghanistan

Russian involvement in the reconstruction of Afghanistan is the result of a number of factors relating to Russia's national interests and its growing role within the global and regional system of international relations. In spite of the ousting of the Taliban regime in 2001, Afghanistan continues to generate threats and challenges to Russian security, and the security of Russia's allies in Central Asia. These challenges include drug-trafficking, Islamic extremism and terrorism, political instability and widespread corruption.

Illegal Narcotics

At the current time, the most dangerous threat to Russia emanating from Afghanistan is the production, unlawful circulation and smuggling of drugs. A considerable proportion of Afghan illegal narcotics go to Russia. In spite of claims by the Afghan authorities that drug production is steadily decreasing (in 2007 its volume was

8200 tons, in 2008 it is 7700 tons, a 6% drop), the volume of Afghan opiates illegally imported into Russia remains at more or less the same level. Almost 25% of all drugs produced in Afghanistan, which amounts to almost 4 tons of opium a day (enough to produce 6 million doses of pure heroin), enter Russia from Afghanistan's northern border via the territory of the Central Asian Republics.

Heroin is trafficked into Russia along several routes—across Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. A substantial amount of the heroin entering Russia is transported onto Western Europe, but most of it is consumed in Russia. Official statistics in Russia state that there are 2.5 million drug addicts in this country, with Russia now ranked as the world's No. 1 consumer of Afghan heroin. In recent years narco-mania has developed into a national crisis. Almost 30,000 people, mainly young, die of drug overdoses annually. Thus, Afghan heroin has become a real threat to the health of the Russian population, and a serious factor worsening the demographic situation. Therefore, the fight against Afghan drugs is a high priority in Russian foreign policy.

The problem of Afghan drugs is closely tied to the Taliban and its allies. Drugs are one of the Taliban's most significant, if not primary, financial source. The Taliban invest in drug production, provide protection for its harvesting, supply seeds and credits for farmers producing drugs (while often using violence), sell drugs, and collect taxes (known as *ushr*) from the producers of drugs in the territory under their control. Altogether they accumulate close to half a billion dollars income annually, of which taxes constitute 70 to 75 million dollars.

Islamic Extremism

Another serious threat to Russia and its allies is Islamic extremism, which constitutes both the ideology and political practice of the Taliban and other radical Islamist groupings linked to "Al-Qaeda". Despite the numerical increase of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the US-led International coalition forces, Islamists have systematically escalated hostilities against Karzai's government and NATO troops, expanding the area under their influence and control. According to the International Center of Cooperation and Security, in 2008 the Taliban maintained a military presence on 52% of Afghan territory. By the beginning of 2010 this figure has considerably increased: now armed groups of extremists operate on 72% of the country's territory, including the previously calm Western and Northern provinces, which are in immediate proximity to the Central Asian Republics.

The Taliban have close ties with extremist groupings operating in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, first of all the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir. Due to the efforts of the army and police in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the bulk of these Islamist fighters have been driven from these countries. However, most simply joined the ranks of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, who have established a convenient haven in neighboring Pakistan. In the spring of 2007, a large section of IMU militants based in Pakistan were eliminated by local tribal militia assisted by the Pakistani army. Yet, many continue to operate and have re-entered Afghanistan and joined local Taliban. The close cooperation between Central Asian Islamic extremists and Afghan Islamic extremists is an open threat to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as well as to Russia, because Moscow views the Central Asian region as its own area of responsibility and positions itself as a guarantor of regional security. Additionally, Afghan insurgents also threaten Russia by embracing Chechens connected with the remnants of separatist-movement in their homeland. This concern about Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus is why Russia is deeply interested in defeating Islamic extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan and the region. The recent suicide attacks in Moscow, which led to 40 civilian casualties, may be viewed as a striking illustration of this threat.

Corruption

Russia's other concerns are related to corruption in Afghanistan, which is becoming endemic to such a degree that Afghanistan is now only second to Somalia as the most corrupt state in the world. Corruption is corroding and destroying the reconstruction project in Afghanistan, leading the US administration of President Obama to identify the struggle against corruption as the main priority of its new Afghan strategy. Similarly to drugs, corruption can become a trans-border and hence transnational phenomenon. Indeed, corruption in Afghanistan is spreading and affecting power structures in neighboring countries, including some of Russia's most important allies and partners.

Contemporary Russian-Afghan Relations

As outlined, Russia faces a number of serious challenges and threats emanating from the territory of Afghanistan. As a result, Russia is directly interested in addressing these challenges, along with the Afghan people and world community, and thus Moscow actively participates in the war against narco-trafficking, the struggle with Islamic extremism, the revival of Afghanistan's

war-torn economy and the aim of returning Afghanistan to peaceful life. Moreover, Russia cannot ignore the destiny of the Afghan people, with whom it has a history of good neighborly relations. It is also considered that peace and stability in Afghanistan is necessary to create a stable security situation in the countries surrounding Afghanistan, including Russia.

Recently, new opportunities have emerged for Russia to engage with the rebuilding process in Afghanistan. In March 2009, an international conference on Afghanistan was held under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Moscow. A key conclusion reached during this conference was that a solution to the Afghan problem, while the current situation of stalemate between NATO forces and Taliban continues, does not seem possible without the involvement of Russia and its Central Asia allies, because of their rich experience in interaction with Afghanistan. This idea has found widespread support in the West, including from the US. Western politicians and military officials often appeal to Russia to use its past experience to contribute to a peaceful resolution of the situation in Afghanistan. The latest appeal of this kind was made by the Secretary General of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who stated in a meeting with Prime Minister Putin on the 17th of December 2009, that he saw Afghanistan as a core issue of cooperation between Russia and NATO.

Due to its geopolitical situation and strategic opportunities, Russia is able to influence Afghanistan through several channels: firstly, Russian-Afghan bilateral relations, which are repeatedly praised by both Russian and Afghan Presidents; secondly, cooperation with its allies and partners in Central Asia; thirdly, participation in regional organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); and fourthly, cooperation with international organizations, such as UN, OSCE, NATO.

At a bilateral level, Russia provides assistance to Afghanistan in economic reconstruction projects, previously financed by Soviet technical and economic aid (142 projects), geological exploration and personnel training, including police officers specializing in counter-narcotics. Although limited in scale, military technical cooperation between the two countries is also developing. Also, Russia is active in multilateral cooperation between the Central Asian Republics and Afghanistan, including in the energy sphere. At the present time, Tajikistan is completing the construction of the largest hydroelectric power station in the region, named "Songtuda", with Russian financial and technical assis-

tance. The energy Songtuda produces will be transmitted to Afghanistan and further on to Pakistan.

The provision of assistance to NATO has been one of the most significant components of Moscow's recent Afghan policy. Russia has provided use of its air space and ground facilities for delivering various NATO goods to Afghanistan, including troops and weapons. An agreement on these arrangements was signed by Putin on the sidelines of the NATO Council session in Bucharest, April 2008. Additionally, as confirmed during the meeting of Anders Fogh Rasmussen with Russian leaders on 17 December 2009 in Moscow, Russia has expressed a readiness to expand cooperation. Such cooperation would also involve the Central Asian Republics, whose territory is used for the shipment of NATO's goods. A number of NATO states have concluded respective agreements with the Central Asian Republics, but it has proven to be a complex and drawn-out process for the West to deal with each of the Central Asian Republics individually. Taking this into account, it is logical that Russia proposes to establish direct contacts between NATO and CSTO, the latter comprising Russia and the Central Asian countries. From a Russian perspective, cooperation between NATO and CSTO should not be restricted to the transportation of NATO equipment, but may also include wider interaction in Afghanistan, for instance joint efforts to tackle drugs and terrorism. CSTO possesses rich experience in this area.

In addition, Russian membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is viewed as a way of impacting on the situation in Afghanistan. From its very beginning SCO set out to provide regional security and fight separatism and Islamic extremism. SCO already interacts with Afghanistan, within the framework of the SCO-Afghan Contact Group, which coordinates the efforts of the two sides in their struggle against terrorism and narco-trafficking. However, SCO faces a number of problems, which restrict its participation in Afghanistan. Firstly, its member states have ruled out a direct military presence in Afghanistan, and in any case SCO does not have its own armed forces. Secondly, its financial base is weak: last year its budget did not exceed \$4 million, which barely covers its personnel expenses. Thirdly, owing to its limited financial resources, it does not have joint economic and social projects. Fourthly, there are many internal discrepancies among SCO member states, including political, military, economic, state borders, national and others. Thus, SCO is not a highly integrated organization. Finally, the SCO member-states have different goals in and linkages with Afghanistan.

Without doubt, they are united by common threats emanating from Afghanistan—terrorism, national separatism, Islamic extremism, narco-traffic, general instability. Yet, the scale and prioritization of these threats is perceived differently by the member-states. Russia is mainly concerned with Afghan narco-trafficking. This concern is shared by the Central Asian Republics. In addition, the Central Asian Republics are greatly concerned about the threat of Islamic extremism originating from Afghan territory. China is more preoccupied with ensuring its economic interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia. At the same time, all of the SCO member-states are aware of the growing US political and military influence in the region. This complex array of dynamics makes it difficult for SCO's member-states to elaborate a unified international approach towards Afghanistan.

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Nonetheless, all are interested in the development of a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan and to this end support and are ready to contribute to the efforts of the international coalition in its fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Conclusion

Afghanistan, with all its problems, has once again become an important Russian foreign policy interest. Russia shares the aims of the international coalition in Afghanistan and supports the efforts of the world community to eliminate the threats emanating from Afghanistan. Therefore, within its capacity, Moscow is ready to play a more active part in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Analysis

Afghanistan's Significance for Russia: Regional or Global Strategy?

By Natasha Kuhrt, London

Abstract

Afghanistan is of great significance for Russia, primarily in terms of security but also as part of its wider strategy to assert its influence in Central Asia. Russia is promoting the CSTO as a regional security force, but at the present time it is not capable of bringing security to Afghanistan. As a result, in spite of reservations about the strategy adopted by ISAF, Russia is hopeful that NATO's presence in Afghanistan is successful, and Moscow thus continues to provide the ISAF operation with support.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist acts, Russia stood shoulder to shoulder with the United States ready to combat terrorism wherever it might be. However, it very soon became clear that the objectives of Russia and the US were rather different. For Russia, the Taliban was a security headache with which it had been battling for some time, and that was intimately connected to developments in Tajikistan where Russia was engaged in a "peacekeeping mission". The Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 had confirmed that the continuation of conflict in Afghanistan was a real threat to the security of Russia's southern borders, and therefore directly affected Russian interests. Therefore, on the face of it, it was logical that Russia should welcome US attempts to tackle al-Qaeda and the Taliban, in partic-

ular because from the early 1990s Russian policymakers had nurtured hopes that the US and Russia would curb Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia together. However, contrary to Russian expectations, the US appeared to prefer bilateral relations with the Central Asian states, with energy, not Islamic fundamentalism, its main focus. Indeed, Russian academics and policymakers criticized the doctrine of "geopolitical pluralism" advanced by Zbigniew Brzezinski, which aimed to make the Central Asian states as independent as possible from Moscow, and which advocated that Washington prioritize partnerships with Turkey or China over Russia in its Central Asian policy. Furthermore, it argued that China should be viewed as a means of curbing excessive Russian influence in the region.