

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.

As it has become increasingly clear that the Taliban has not in fact been eliminated and that the US presence in Central Asia is not a temporary phenomenon, Russian views of the military campaign in Afghanistan have become far more ambivalent. Russia's initial support for the Afghan campaign, the "war of necessity" as opposed to the "war of choice" in Iraq, has lessened, and Russia now questions the legitimacy of the war and its extension into "AfPak". The democratization agenda of the Bush administration in Central Asia, entailing support for "colored revolutions" in the former Soviet space, became a major bone of contention between the US and Russia. The advent of the Obama administration with its awkward *leitmotiv* of a "reset" in bilateral relations, appeared to downplay democratization, as part of a general toning down of the more normative and prescriptive aspects of the US's Russia policy. This should have assuaged Russian concerns regarding Afghanistan. However, Russia has been cautious about the whole idea of "reset", seeing it as narrow and selective, and as not really addressing Russia's top-priority interests. For Russia, nothing less than a "reconfiguration" of the relationship will suffice, to include cooperation with regional security organizations sponsored by Russia.

Afghanistan's Place in Russian Foreign and Security Policy

The 2008 Russian Foreign Policy Concept places regional and subregional organizations sponsored by Russia at the forefront of Central Asian security, principally the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

While lacking in the energy resources of other Central Asian states, Afghanistan is still a potentially important transit state (*or a strategic backwater?*). However, in some respects Afghanistan's importance lies more in its role as a source of threats to Russian national security: Afghanistan is a supplier of narcotics to the Central Asian states, which in turn traffic and distribute drugs to Russia. As much as 90% of the heroin entering Russia originates in Afghanistan. Russia argues that Afghanistan's role as a prime producer of opium, principally for the manufacture of heroin, is a major security headache for Russia. The neighboring Central Asian states are all conduits for narcotics trafficking. Most of the drugs trafficked come from Northern Afghanistan, the stronghold of the erstwhile Northern Alliance, supported by Moscow.

An additional domestic dimension for Russia is that migrant workers from Tajikistan are involved in drugs trafficking and distribution. Only a small proportion

of these drugs are consumed in the US or Europe, with the bulk of them being consumed in Russia. It is therefore argued that the US and Europe are only marginally interested in stopping narcotics trafficking. Moreover, ISAF's strategy of turning a "blind eye" to poppy growing is seen as disastrous by Moscow. Indeed the basis of the new NATO strategy of engaging with and even integrating former Taliban is viewed negatively in Moscow, as it is feared that this could lead to a resurgence of fundamentalism in the wider region, leading to destabilization far beyond Afghanistan. It has been suggested that Russia is concerned that the main purpose behind this policy is to consolidate a NATO base in Russia's "near abroad". Clearly, even though the prospect of NATO membership for Georgia is off the menu, Russia is still apprehensive regarding longer term NATO/US ambitions.

Afghanistan is also of key significance to Russia's wider Central Asian policy: the so-called Russian "return to Central Asia" is an integral part of Russia's claim to great power status. The idea once put forward by Anatolii Chubais of a "liberal empire" provides an ideological basis to this strategy: in this formulation, Russia is presented as a "responsible" great power with commensurate responsibilities for ensuring the security of less "capable" states. This inextricable link was emphasised by Russia's ambassador to NATO, Dmitrii Rogozin, who, echoing the Foreign Policy Concept, warned that should the NATO campaign in Afghanistan fail, then Russia would be left *with no choice but to implement its multipronged involvement in the affairs of Central Asia* (italics added by the author). The consequences of the failure would primarily be an increase in the "narcoterrorist threat", and a general upsurge in fundamentalist sentiment, leading to the destabilisation of the entire region. For this reason, the nature and character of NATO's exit strategy from Afghanistan is vitally important from a Russian perspective.

Regional Security and Political Structures

The Russian National Security Strategy identifies the inadequacy of existing global and regional security architecture, and therefore advocates a greater involvement for Russia in developing such arrangements. This involvement is inextricably linked to the "beefing-up" of the CSTO, which in the National Security Strategy is identified as a means of countering regional military challenges and threats and ensuring long-term stability. The 2008 Foreign Policy Concept also elaborates the importance of the CSTO in detail. The Foreign Policy Concept notes that the "international authority" of the

CSTO should be strengthened and links developed with similar regional organizations, such as NATO. It also draws attention to US plans for a “Greater Central Asia”, to include Afghanistan, Pakistan and even India, while acknowledging the importance of the US and other Western countries as providers of technologies and other resources for modernization. It is therefore recommended that a complex approach be taken, which would position Russia as an agent of modernization and, importantly, stability—the implication being that Russia needs to position itself as a competitor in the battle for this Greater Central Asia.

In the Foreign Policy Concept (signed into force while Bush was still President) it is suggested that the CSTO could stabilise the Afghan-Tajik border together with NATO, an undertaking that could even include Iran. Russia seeks to emphasize that its involvement via the CSTO offers the voice of “experience”, noting its understanding of the balance of ethno-religious forces and groupings and its influence from the days of the Northern Alliance.

In spite of the fact that Russia continues to see NATO as a threat, cooperation on Afghanistan has continued: for example, Russia has allowed ISAF to use its territory for transit purposes, but, at the same time, Russia’s opposition to NATO’s tolerance of poppy growing continues to be a source of unease.

Key Regional Actors

Other key partners for Russia in the region include India, China and Iran. Both Russia and China have expressed their disapproval of Washington’s policy of isolating Iran, viewing Iran as an important economic partner. Also, at one time Iran was considered a valuable ally against fundamentalism in Afghanistan, although reports that Iran is courting the Taliban make Iran a less certain ally in this respect. An additional complication to cooperation with Iran on Afghanistan is Russia’s condemnation of nuclear proliferation, which is making it increasingly difficult for Moscow to support Tehran as disputes between Iran and the West continue over Tehran’s nuclear ambitions.

India and China are both so-called “strategic partners” of Russia, and both have been critical of the NATO campaign in Afghanistan because of their concerns regarding the longer-term situation in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of NATO forces. Indeed, India is concerned that any NATO withdrawal might lead to a rise in Pakistani influence in Afghanistan and a concomitant increase in fundamentalism, leading to destabilisation. The India-NATO relationship over Afghanistan is

further complicated by the fact that the US is trying to keep both Pakistan and India on-board; a recent US-India nuclear deal appeared to cement a special relationship between the US and India, but India remains anxious that the US may ignore its concerns because of its commitment to its existing wider “AfPak” strategy. India, like Russia, is very critical of NATO efforts to engage with or even to “buy off” the Taliban, considering this to ultimately imply a return to power of the Taliban. Any government in Kabul which is perceived by New Delhi as leaning towards Islamabad is a real concern. Attempts to revive the Primakovian notion of a Russia-India-China axis, which would ensure stability in Eurasia remain purely declarative at the present time. Moreover, with the US establishing increasingly strong strategic ties to India, such an axis appears less likely, although Russia-India-China energy projects cannot be ruled out.

Through the SCO and the “BRIC” dialogue, Russia has attempted to fashion alternative avenues for tackling the security challenges of the wider Central Asian region, and, with the BRIC idea, seeks ways to augment Russia’s influence at a global level. However, as far as the SCO is concerned, China’s prominent role in the organization, and Beijing’s well-known aversion to military alliances and prioritization of economic over political and military objectives, mean that the SCO can hardly be seen as the mechanism to manage any “fallout” from Afghanistan. Moreover, Russia and China’s longer term objectives in the region are not necessarily harmonious.

Domestic and Regional Dimensions

Russia’s own attempts to assure security, for example increasing security along Central Asian borders, have been largely unsuccessful, with Central Asian border patrols remaining corrupt and ineffective. It is questionable whether Russia can, in the context of the CSTO for example, manage to stem narcotics trafficking without cooperation from NATO. Indeed, Lavrov appeared to acknowledge the continued need for joint cooperation when he stressed at a meeting with Hillary Clinton in January 2010 that “the international community still has not fully tapped the potential of the CSTO, in particular its antinarcotics efforts”. In essence, Russia would like to see the CSTO engage in “global peacekeeping” as a way of legitimating this organisation. In the best-case scenario, NATO would acknowledge the CSTO as a dialogue partner. Unfortunately NATO has been reluctant to accord such a role to Russia. Thus, while in December 2009 NATO and Russia agreed on common threats and challenges to security in the twenty-

first century, little of substance has emerged from this common identification. In NATO's long-awaited new strategy (May 2010), there is little regarding this point; the most positive note consists of the strategy's approval of Russia's new military doctrine as "strictly defensive", which, given the "fact that NATO is a defensive Alliance" is taken as a "good starting point"—a fairly non-committal statement.

Conclusions

The lesson for Russia is that although it strives to be Central Asia's "protector", as a kind of semi-colonial civilizer, the uncertainty of regional power relationships and the complex mix of converging and diverging interests of the various powers, make it impossible for any one state to dominate the region. The existing regional fora favoured by Russia are still inadequate for tackling the myriad of problems in Central Asia. For this rea-

son it is hard to see how Russia could take on the task of Afghanistan, if and when ISAF leaves. Whether other regional powers, for example, Iran step in, is an open question, but Russia must tread carefully: while it has little influence over Tehran, Moscow may not wish to risk alienating Iran, in particular as Tehran may see some merit in creating problems for NATO in Afghanistan by supporting its erstwhile enemy the Taliban. Meanwhile, Russia is on the horns of a dilemma: while NATO still represents a theoretical threat for Russia, its failure in Afghanistan would be an even greater security challenge, and might complicate Russian plans for the wider region. Therefore, from a Russian perspective it is positive that at the present time NATO will not willingly contemplate failure in Afghanistan; as Anders Fogh Rasmussen has said, Afghanistan represents a critical test of NATO's effectiveness.

About the Author

Natasha Kuhrt is a Lecturer at the Department of War Studies, Kings College, London. She is the author of *Russian Policy Towards China and Japan: The El'tsin and Putin Periods* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), and is currently working on a book on Russian foreign policy for Polity Press.

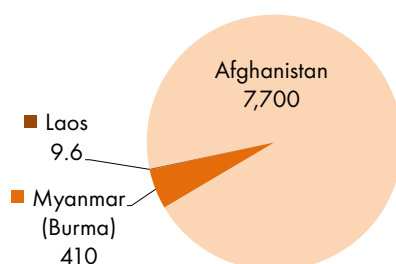
Further Reading

- Marlene LaRuelle, *Beyond the Afghan Trauma: Russia's Return to Afghanistan* (Washington D.C., Jamestown Foundation, 2009)
- Igor Safranchuk, "The Afghan Problem in the Regional Context", *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 3, July–September 2009.

Statistics

The Global Production and Consumption of Opiates

World Opium Production in the Major Cultivating Countries 2008 (metric tons)



Source: UNODC World Drug Report 2009, http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2009/WDR2009_eng_web.pdf