

A RUSSIAN STRATEGY FOR AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE COALITION TROOP WITHDRAWAL

DMITRI TRENIN, OLEG KULAKOV, ALEXEY MALASHENKO, PETR TOPYCHKANOV | MAY 2014

Twenty-five years after Soviet troops left the country, Afghanistan is facing another historical crossroads, this time on the eve of the withdrawal of U.S.-led international coalition combat troops, the International Security Assistance Force, scheduled to depart by the end of 2014. The country's present is unstable, and its future is uncertain—will it develop progressively, or is it bound for chaos and regression, as was the case after the Soviet troop withdrawal?

Potential threats and risks associated with post-withdrawal Afghanistan are a matter of concern for neighboring countries and the international community. In addition, reduced American military presence and weaker U.S. interest in the country will increase the role other great powers and neighboring nations—mainly Russia and China, as well as Pakistan, Iran, India, and states from both the Gulf and Central Asia—will play in Afghanistan.

The future stability and development of Afghanistan will affect the interests of the Russian Federation. As coalition troops prepare to leave Afghanistan, Russia should consider a strategy that helps maintain stability in the region but that does not require Moscow to intervene in the domestic disputes that will likely characterize post-withdrawal Afghanistan.

A YEAR OF CHANGE FOR AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan faces two major milestones in 2014: presidential elections, which took place on April 5, 2014, and the withdrawal of coalition combat troops by the end of the year.

Presidential elections have not significantly strengthened Afghan statehood or definitively resolved the question of who will control the country. They may, however, help clarify the current ethno-political and clan balance of power in the country. The top brass of the regime may reconfigure itself after President Hamid Karzai leaves office, even if he remains an influential political figure. Essentially, the elections will trigger a power struggle in post-American Afghanistan.

The question of continued foreign military presence in Afghanistan after coalition combat troops leave remains open. Complete withdrawal of foreign troops, as was done

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dmitri Trenin, *director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, chairs the research council and Foreign and Security Policy Program.*

Oleg Kulakov, *Ph.D., teaches at the Military University of the Russian Defense Ministry.*

Alexey Malashenko *holds a doctorate in history and is a member of the Carnegie Moscow Center research council and co-chairman of the Religion, Society and Security Program.*

Petr Topychkanov, *Ph.D., is an associate in the Carnegie Moscow Center's Nonproliferation Program.*

in Iraq, is still possible unless Washington and Kabul reach an agreement on the status of American troops in Afghanistan. However, unlike oil-rich Iraq, one of Afghanistan's primary sources of income is foreign aid, and a complete troop withdrawal would do away with most of this international assistance. In this case, the onset of large-scale instability in Afghanistan would be quite likely, with internal Afghan conflicts becoming more intense and the country's political forces radicalizing.

The retention of a limited U.S. military contingent and continued U.S. support for the Afghan government would therefore help avoid instability and facilitate a softer resolution to the question of the country's future regime. For Russia, which prioritizes a stable Afghanistan, this would be the most desirable solution, provided that foreign troops remain in the country under a UN Security Council mandate.

But this may not be a feasible option. The administration in Washington is pursuing an exit strategy in Afghanistan, while the U.S. Congress intends to gradually reduce American aid to Kabul. Still, unexpected negative developments in the region—for instance, in Pakistan—may reverse this trend.

If U.S. troops leave Afghanistan entirely, the Persian Gulf oil monarchies—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar—could step in as potential sponsors, but instability in the country would likely increase if this were to happen. Such a scenario poses risks to the Russian Federation and to Central Asian countries.

Afghanistan's major political and military-political forces will be focusing on the country's internal affairs, primarily on the question of power. The domestic political and military-political struggle is unlikely to spill over Afghan borders or to cause large-scale hostilities in the north, closest to Russia. And of course there is no chance that the Taliban, should it gain power, would cross the Amu Darya River and invade Central Asia.

However, destabilization in Afghanistan would probably trigger greater activity on the part of individual radical

groups that are directed toward Central Asia, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. This development would challenge some of Moscow's broader interests in the region.

RUSSIA'S INTERESTS AND CHALLENGES

Russia's primary concern in Afghanistan is maintaining security in the Afghan–Central Asian region. Moscow seeks to prevent instability in Central Asian countries, some of which—Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan—are its allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance of post-Soviet states. In addition, Russia has a vested interest in stemming the flow of drugs coming from Afghanistan.

But while a peaceful, stable, and developing Afghanistan would be in Russia's interest, Moscow does not have vital stakes in any of the possible Afghan regimes. Thus, it would be dangerous and pointless for Russia to get involved in Afghanistan's internal power struggle. Moscow can work with any potential leaders in Kabul and maintain ties with any regional or ethnic groups as long as they do not engage in activities directed against the Russian Federation.

At the moment, Moscow has no significant economic interests in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, if the situation there stabilizes, the Russian Federation might take part in rebuilding the Afghan economy within the framework of international assistance efforts. But the prospects for and potential extent of this sort of aid remain unclear at this time, and it would be inexpedient for Russia to finance the rebuilding effort in Afghanistan on its own.

Afghanistan does not currently pose a direct military threat to Russia, nor will it pose such a threat in the foreseeable future—even if the Taliban comes to power in Kabul and manages to gain control over the entire Afghan territory, including its northern regions. This is a fairly unlikely scenario. The Taliban's influence and potential to take and maintain power in Afghanistan are not as great as many people think. The Taliban itself represents a complex socio-political group with a number of internal factions and conflicts, and the conservative Afghan society is not generally

amenable to religious radicalism. All told, the 1996–2001 Taliban rule was an aberration.

An unstable Afghanistan does, however, pose indirect risks to Russia's security, primarily in the form of the drug traffic that originates on Afghan territory and reaches the Russian market through Central Asian countries. In the last decade, this threat has grown enormously. International Security Assistance Forces and U.S. troops essentially neglected the war on drugs, fearing backlash from a significant part of the Afghan population.

There is also the threat that Afghan territory may turn into a training ground for terrorists and militants that target Russia, which is another serious risk. Extremists training in Afghanistan would not necessarily be limited to groups that originate in the North Caucasus. Russia has recently been confronted by a geographically and ethnically diverse pool of Islamic extremists.

But this threat may not be imminent. Since 2011, Syria has been the main staging area for extremist factions. As for al-Qaeda, Afghanistan stopped being its major base a long time ago, and the organization has morphed into a sort of “franchise” for a hodgepodge of extremist groups.

Furthermore, the situation in Afghanistan may affect Russia's security indirectly by way of Moscow's allies in Central Asia. These nations fear the possible consequences of destabilization in Afghanistan, which may include an influx of refugees or an upsurge in Islamic extremism, drug trafficking, and transborder crime, and they may well turn to Moscow for help.

The power struggle between the Pashtuns—Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, which nevertheless does not constitute the majority of the Afghan population—and other ethnic groups, particularly Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, may draw Tajikistan, Russia's nominal ally, and Uzbekistan into internal Afghan conflicts. In this context, Dushanbe and Tashkent would very likely try to influence Moscow's Afghan policies, hoping to make the Russian Federation serve Tajik and Uzbek interests. Something similar happened in the 1990s when

Russia was drawn into supporting the Tajik- and Uzbek-dominated Northern Alliance that was fighting the Taliban government in Kabul.

RUSSIA'S TOOLS IN THE REGION

Russia's resources in and around Afghanistan for countering these threats are rather limited. It has no allies inside the country, and its relations with individual Central Asian states are complex and require careful calibration. Russian military presence in the region is relatively minor and is directed mainly against traditional adversaries, such as potentially hostile states and their armies, rather than tasked with combatting terrorism or insurgencies.

There are essentially no reliable borders along the route from Afghanistan to Russia that could stop armed groups or individual terrorists from reaching Russian territory. It would be extremely expensive to fortify the border between Russia and Kazakhstan, one of the longest land borders in the world (over 4,350 miles), and it would also be counterproductive politically given the close relations and numerous integration projects between the two countries. The Tajik-Afghan border must be strengthened, but Tajikistan's positions and interests will determine how effective control along this border will be. Dushanbe does not see eye to eye with Moscow on every issue despite the official alliances between Tajikistan and the Russian Federation. Another Russian ally, Kyrgyzstan, has a relatively weak central government and strong regional clans, making border control difficult. And Afghanistan's borders with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are controlled from the north by Ashgabat and Tashkent, which are not bound by any alliances with Moscow.

Russia's protections against Afghan drug exports are also weak and ineffective. Central Asian and Russian criminal organizations are certainly involved in the Afghan drug traffic, and these groups are apparently patronized by corrupt law-enforcement and other government officials in their respective countries. Evidence indicates that some of the so-called Afghan drugs are in fact produced in Central Asian countries. In addition, the fact that Russia experiences an enormous influx of labor migrants from Central Asia—particularly from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan—complicates efforts against drug smuggling.

Nevertheless, Moscow does have a number of tools at its disposal for increasing its own security and that of the region. It can engage in focused diplomacy inside Afghanistan and in relations with regional powers, especially India, Iran, China, and Pakistan. It also has military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and can interact with its CSTO partners and use the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a Eurasian economic, political, and security union, as a platform for diplomacy. However, in order to use these tools effectively, Moscow will need to develop a cohesive strategy.

RUSSIAN RELATIONS WITH AFGHANISTAN

Since Russia has no vital interests in Afghanistan and is not bound by obligations to allies or clients inside the country, its only concern should be the nation's overall stability. Under no pretext should Russia involve itself in Afghan affairs—either politically or militarily. The experience of the Soviet-led Afghan war of 1979–1989 bears out the wisdom of this hands-off approach. Moscow should take a consistent and firm stand against any attempts made by other states, including its CSTO partners, to pull Russia into Afghanistan.

The preferred situation for Moscow would be a sovereign and stable Afghanistan with no foreign troops on its soil. However, prodding coalition forces to leave Afghanistan before basic stability has been established in the country would run counter to Russia's interests. Furthermore, as Moscow cannot substantially affect decisions made by Washington and Kabul, it must be prepared for any scenario—be it continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan authorized by UN Security Council mandate or the complete withdrawal of U.S. and allied troops by the end of 2014.

Russia must preserve and maintain its relations with the government in Kabul, including those in the security sphere. For instance, Afghan security officers and civilian personnel should be able to continue their education in Russia, even if existing initiatives, such as a Russia-NATO program to train Afghan air force technicians, are suspended as a result of the developments in Crimea and Ukraine. It would also be expedient for Russia to sell arms and other military equipment to Afghanistan, provided that Kabul (or another actor on its behalf) is able to pay for them.

However, there should be limits to Moscow's security cooperation with Kabul. Russia should avoid dispatching military advisers or technical specialists to Afghanistan to keep Moscow from being gradually drawn into domestic Afghan conflicts.

Rather than playing its own political game in Afghanistan and the region, Russia should distance itself from internal Afghan disputes and preserve its neutrality toward the competing domestic parties and rival neighboring powers. This approach obviates the need for Russia to choose favorites among the Afghan factions.

The same principle applies to the Kabul government: Russia should not go out of its way to help any particular Afghan regime stay in power. Moscow's historical record of supporting Afghan minorities in the Northern Alliance against the primarily Pashtun Taliban is irrelevant under current conditions.

Instead, Russia should communicate and maintain working relations with all significant political forces in Afghanistan and the region. This will keep Moscow abreast of the changing situation and allow Russia to protect and advance its own interests if need be.

RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE NEW GREAT GAME

Any attempt to fill the void in Afghanistan after the coalition troop withdrawal will likely result in an unwelcome destabilization of the region. Still, the diminishing Western presence in Afghanistan could lead to greater competition between neighboring powers, which may stage a new "great game" for the so-called heart of Asia.

Russia has no need to enter this contest and vie for influence in Afghanistan against other, more motivated external players, such as Pakistan. Doing so would be a waste of Moscow's efforts and would risk damaging Russia's relations with the countries fighting for influence. But understanding the positions these countries hold and taking these stances into account will allow Russia to formulate an approach and policy toward Afghanistan that best serves Moscow's interests.

Maintaining working relations with all the significant players in Afghanistan and the region will help Russia counter the main threats a destabilized Afghanistan would pose to Russia's security—terrorism, insurgencies, and drug trafficking. In this light, connections with the political leadership—as well as the intelligence and military structures—inside Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan will be especially valuable.

Pakistan

Pakistan is the most active and interested player on the Afghan stage. Pashtun tribes that live along both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border act as the major link connecting the two countries, and the border that divides these tribes is a source of serious conflict between Islamabad and Kabul.

Pakistan traditionally treats Afghanistan as being within its sphere of influence and regards the situation in that country as both a matter of Pakistani national security and an opportunity to gain strategic advantages over India, Islamabad's main rival. As such, Pakistan has been actively and consistently involved in Afghanistan's internal affairs since the second half of the 1970s. This involvement will increase after the international coalition troops depart.

When it comes to other key players in Afghanistan, Pakistan has very uneven relations with the United States, close ties with China, and an alliance with Saudi Arabia. In Central Asia, Islamabad has held some sway over Dushanbe and Tashkent since the 1990s.

Pakistan cannot become Russia's ally, but Russia should not necessarily treat Pakistan as a rival, let alone an adversary, in Afghanistan. Pragmatic cooperation with Islamabad on the issues of terrorism and drug trafficking may prove helpful to Moscow.

The Central Asian Nations

The Central Asian states are concerned about the regional consequences of instability in Afghanistan. They worry about the survival of their own political regimes, the economic burden associated with the possible influx of refugees, and the geopolitical changes that might result from reduced

American presence in the region. In reality, most political problems in Central Asia stem from within individual nations, Afghan refugees would likely only pose a problem for Tajikistan, and Central Asia's economic prospects depend more on China, Russia, and the Western states than on U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Drug trafficking and production, however, do pose a threat to the population of all Central Asian countries—and to Russia.

In the wake of the troop withdrawal, greater cooperation with Moscow's allies and partners in Central Asia will be necessary to ensure the country's security, especially in the south. Russia must play a much more active role here. Economic integration and cooperation are its main policy tools in the region, but it should also seek to build greater security sector cooperation along two axes. Multilaterally, Moscow should operate in the framework of the CSTO; the Customs Union between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan; and the proposed Eurasian Economic Union of post-Soviet states. Bilaterally, Russia should strengthen relations with each of its partners.

Enhancing security cooperation with other CSTO members should be a top priority. Russia's security policy in the region would particularly benefit from improving relations with Kazakhstan, which is a key regional player. There should be a privileged partnership between Moscow and Astana within the CSTO to ensure security in Central Asia.

Two other CSTO members—Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—require Russia's special attention because they host Russian military bases. With coalition forces leaving Afghanistan and the United States closing its Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan, there is an increased need for Russia's direct participation in protecting the Tajik-Afghan border as well as for constructing a Russian military base in southern Kyrgyzstan. Joint military exercises involving Russian, Tajik, and Kyrgyz troops should also be conducted regularly. To ensure more effective cooperation in this sphere, Russia should help rearm the Kyrgyz and Tajik armies and upgrade the skills of their military personnel, primarily their officer corps.

A diplomatic component should reinforce the military one at the Russian army bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The commanders of Russian contingents there should have political advisers who are in constant communication with the leadership of the host countries.

Russia should also seek to optimize the CSTO's functions and tasks. The organization's political component must be strengthened, and closer ties between member states' national security councils, intelligence agencies, and law-enforcement communities should be fostered. There should also be attempts to develop closer contacts between the political elites of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Creating a CSTO academy in Kazakhstan to prepare a cadre of regional security specialists would help strengthen the organization, especially if this institution offered courses to top military and law-enforcement commanders, political leaders, and high-ranking officials from member countries.

The CSTO's Collective Rapid Reaction Force, an armed task force comprised of members from all CSTO states, is intended to be employed in emergency situations. The collective force should be engaged not only in counterterrorism but also in counterinsurgency and counternarcotic operations.

Two of the five Central Asian states—Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—are not CSTO members. Moscow needs to intensify bilateral contacts with Tashkent and Ashkhabad to alleviate their possible fears regarding Russia's policy in the region. Moscow should pay particular attention to the development of its contacts with Uzbekistan, the most populated and centrally located country in the region.

To address the problems of drug production and trafficking, Moscow should work with Central Asian countries to increase the efficiency of Russia's Federal Drug Control Service. With the consent of Russia's allies and in cooperation with them, this organization should be allowed to operate beyond Russia's borders in Central Asian countries. This expanded reach will enable it to better stem the flow of drugs and detect and destroy drug-producing facilities.

In addition, enhancing regional migration policy and its instruments will be key to ensuring Russia's security

in a post-withdrawal Afghanistan. Visa-free travel, already in place between the Customs Union members and the members of the future Eurasian Economic Union, ought to continue. At the same time, Russia's Federal Migration Service must maintain close contacts with its Central Asian counterparts to closely monitor migration flows from other countries in the region in order to prevent drug smuggling and keep extremists and terrorists out.

India and China

Russia would also benefit from consulting and possibly cooperating with great Asian powers—namely China and India—on the issues involving Afghanistan. New Delhi and especially Beijing are starting to play a substantially greater role in South and Central Asia.

India's presence in Afghanistan is not merely part of a regional geopolitical strategy vis-à-vis its rivals, Pakistan and China. It is also an important example of New Delhi's attempts to assert itself as a great Asian power. If the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerges victorious in India's general elections this year—an outcome many see as probable—the BJP will likely strengthen India's resolve to play a greater international role.

New Delhi and Moscow are strategic partners, and India helps maintain a continental global balance of power that Russia considers favorable. Cooperation with India—including on matters related to Afghanistan, such as increasing regional stabilization, combatting terrorism, and curbing the drug trade—is therefore valuable to Russia.

For India, given its traditional rivalries with Pakistan and China as well as the decreasing American activity and presence in Afghanistan, Russia, together with Iran, is one of few serious partners. At the same time, some of New Delhi's specific interests and aspirations in Afghanistan diverge from Moscow's interests, largely because of India's competition with Pakistan and China.

For its part, China looks at Afghanistan through an economic lens as well as in terms of Beijing's security interests and its broader geopolitical concerns in Central and South

Asia. Chinese state-run companies actively invest in tapping Afghanistan's (and Central Asia's) natural resources.

Pakistan is China's long-standing and close partner, and India is its historical rival. From Beijing's standpoint and in light of its special relations with Islamabad, the Taliban is a political movement that can and must be negotiated with—despite its possible ties with Uyghur Islamist separatists in China and the region. As a result, while maintaining economic interests in Afghanistan, China distances itself from active political involvement in the country's affairs, demonstrating its willingness to cooperate with any regime in Kabul.

For Russia, China is an important global and regional partner. This is true in a number of areas, including on issues related to Afghanistan.

To maximize its consultations and cooperation with India and China, Russia should improve bilateral ties with these countries. At the same time, Moscow should use multilateral platforms to reach out to New Delhi and Beijing. These platforms—such as the SCO; a quadrilateral grouping of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia, and Tajikistan referred to as “the Four”; and RIC (Russia-India-China)—could serve as forums for exchanging ideas and preparing for negotiations.

The United States and NATO

In the short and medium term, the degree of U.S. participation in Afghan affairs will depend on whether Washington signs an agreement with Kabul on continued American troop presence in the country. But even if the troop departure from Afghanistan is complete, the United States, as a global power, will remain concerned with everything that happens around the world, including in Afghanistan.

That said, the major motivation behind American presence and interest in Afghanistan—preventing the creation of terrorist bases in the country—is substantially less relevant now than it was when the U.S. invasion began in 2001. Afghanistan has stopped being a central problem for U.S. foreign and military policies and is quickly becoming peripheral. Of course, it will continue to be of some interest to the United States—for instance, as a drone and air force base—in

the context of Washington's policies on China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian countries, but this interest will be limited.

Due to a radical deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations that has taken place since the start of 2014 and the scheduled withdrawal of U.S. combat troops, there are few prospects for cooperation between Moscow and Washington on issues related to Afghanistan—for instance, on combating drug trafficking. Nevertheless, targeted cooperation in areas of mutual interest should not be excluded.

When it comes to working with other NATO countries, Moscow's options are similarly limited. Not many areas of possible Russian cooperation with NATO members exist, except for the issue of troop and military cargo transit through Russian territory. And as the coalition removes its forces from Afghanistan and Russia's relations with the West continue to deteriorate, the number of issues on which Moscow and NATO could collaborate will decrease even further. There are, however, some prospects for Russian cooperation with Turkey, which continues to be interested in Afghanistan.

Iran

For Iran, Afghanistan is a linguistically, culturally, and religiously close country. Tehran is interested in having a stable, independent neighbor whose balance of political powers roughly reflects Afghanistan's ethnic and religious makeup.

Iran is advancing its interests in Afghanistan primarily through trade and investments. It relies on the help of residents of the Afghan province of Herat, who have traditionally had ties with Iran, as well as ethnic Tajiks and Hazaras. Tehran also has a strong interest in stopping Afghan drug trafficking because many smuggling routes pass through Iran.

Tehran has complex ties to other major players in Afghanistan. It welcomes the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and is developing a partnership with India. It has complicated relations with Pakistan, which, like Iran, aspires to a leadership role in the region and is attempting to be a predominant influence in Afghanistan. And Tehran's relations with Saudi Arabia are hostile.

Iran and Russia, however, have common interests on a number of important issues, ranging from stabilizing Afghanistan to combatting drug trafficking. Both countries also exert influence on Dushanbe and the Afghan Tajiks, which they demonstrated in 1997 by joining forces to help end the civil war in Tajikistan. Moscow and Tehran can use this influence to play a significant role in the post-American Afghanistan, provided they coordinate their actions.

CONCLUSIONS

Russia should not treat the post-2014 situation in Afghanistan as a potential disaster for its security in the south.

An extremist takeover of Afghanistan—and the country's subsequent turn into a hotbed of international terrorism—is not a certainty. Nevertheless, the coalition withdrawal from Afghanistan will force Russia to take more responsibility for regional security.

This heightened responsibility does not mean Russia should be directly involved in Afghan events. Russia should never intervene in infighting in Afghanistan, especially militarily. Its goal should be protecting Russian interests by using diplomatic and other nonviolent means in Afghanistan and in the region.

Moscow should also pursue an active and comprehensive policy in Central Asia—the territory where the first Russian

line of defense against security threats emanating from Afghanistan lies. Having effective working relations with all significant Afghan elites and with all regional powers is an important condition for the success of Russian policy in Afghanistan. This approach is consistent with a well-known great game principle that advises states not to strive for victory but rather to avoid defeat—in Russia's case, to stay out of any new contest over the “heart of Asia” and focus instead on Moscow's interests.

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