

Is Russia Back in Afghanistan?

On October 1 2015, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani requested military equipment from Russia for the Afghan army. A few days earlier, citizens from the former Soviet Republics Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Chechnya had lined up with the Taliban in seizing parts of the Afghan city Kunduz. The current Vice President of Afghanistan – General Dostum – reiterated this request during his visits to Moscow and Chechnya’s capital Grozny on October 5 2015, stressing that Russia and Afghanistan need to unite forces against international terrorism. These recent events reflect the mutual wish to strengthen relations between Moscow and Kabul. As Western presence diminishes, can we expect a more proactive Russia in Afghanistan?

Brief Points

- Russia and Afghanistan have strengthened their bilateral relations significantly during the last few years. The deterioration in US-Afghan and US-Russian relationships is seemingly the main driver for the current rapprochement.
- Russia’s view on Afghanistan remains largely dictated by its concern for a possible spillover of terrorism and extremism from Afghanistan to the Central Asian states and into Russia.
- At the same time, Russia has an interest in framing the situation in Afghanistan as a threat, as it fosters the Central Asian countries’ dependence on Russia as a guarantor for security.
- Former President Karzai supported the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, and visited the Sochi Olympics despite Western criticism. Current President Ashraf Ghani and Vice President Dostum have both visited Russia in 2015, underlining Kabul’s desire to diversify its foreign relations, and strengthen its ties with Russia.
- Given the history of Russia-Afghanistan relations, Russia will most likely assert influence in Afghanistan through already existing networks and through soft power, including economic investments.

Afghanistan's Place in the Russian History

Russia's relations with Afghanistan have long historical roots. During the so-called "Great Game" at the end of the 19th century, the Russian and British empires were competing over influence in Afghanistan. Britain interpreted Russia's expansion into Central Asia as a threat to the British control of India, the crown of the British Empire. Russia's earliest military involvement in Afghanistan also dates from this period. During the so-called "Panjdeh incident" in 1885, Russia seized a part of Afghan territory by the Kushk river with force, resulting in a diplomatic crisis between Russia and Great Britain. Neither Russia nor Great Britain were interested in occupying the full territory of Afghanistan. Rather, as Russia had suggested in 1844, the two empires agreed that Afghanistan could function as a "buffer-state", preventing full-scale conflict between the two great powers.

Conflict between two great powers – later between the Soviet Union and the United States – was nevertheless what fueled the Soviet-Afghan war (1979–1989), still remembered as a national trauma in Russia. The Soviet Union's support to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan's (PDPA) socialist agenda resulted in a decade-long war between the Soviet forces and the pro-PDPA forces, on the one hand, and the US-backed Mujahedeen factions, on the other. Both the human and material costs of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan are broadly read as some of the main causes for the fall of the Soviet Union. Many Afghans have held the Soviet Union responsible for the poverty and despair that followed the war of the 1980s. However, many of the same persons currently working in the Afghan National Security Forces were trained by the Soviet military to support the PDPA forces, and have maintained good relations with their former instructors. Whereas the United States' influence in Afghanistan diminished following the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, Russia asserted its influence through providing weapons and training to the Northern Alliance in order to prevent the Taliban from spreading north. Further, both Russia and Uzbekistan still maintain close ties to the Uzbek warlord General Dostum, the current Vice President of Afghanistan.

Moving on to the 1990s, Russia supported the

fight against the Taliban through aiding its main rival: the Northern Alliance. However, Russian officials had also engaged in dialogue with the Taliban about a possible peace settlement before the 9/11 attacks. In 1995–1996, the Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zamir N. Kabulov, held talks with the leadership of the Taliban, including Mullah Omar, about the release of a Russian air crew who were forced to land in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Russia was also involved in the 6+2 group, initiated by Uzbekistan in 1999, which consisted of Afghanistan's six neighboring states, Russia and the US. The contact group's aim was to bring a peaceful solution to the Afghan Civil War, but they failed to yield any significant results.

How the "War on Terror" Helped Putin

Many trails lead to the current situation in Afghanistan, and the same goes for Russia's interests in the country. As with the West, the most important reference point for understanding Russia's current position on Afghanistan has its origins in the terror attacks in New York and Washington on September 11th, 2001. Putin was the first world leader who gave his support to George Bush's "global war on terror", which was conspicuously similar to an idea Putin had already been contemplating before al-Qaeda hit US territory. Indeed, Putin saw the global war on terrorism launched by Bush as a means to gain international legitimacy for his domestic war against Chechen separatists. This notion colored Russia's policy towards Afghanistan in the early phase after 2001. Russia's support for the US war on terrorism was a double gain for Russia: on the one hand, Western criticisms regarding Russia's human rights abuses in the Northern Caucasus were silenced in the name of countering terrorism. On the other, the Western operations starting in late 2001 aimed at dismantling al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime were seen by Russia as maintaining Russia's security interests in the Central Asian region.

In the Northern Caucasus region in Russia, there have been problems with violent separatist movements. The insurgency that followed the official end of the Second Chechen War in 2009 has attracted militants from the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. Moscow has viewed these as a possible threat to the sovereignty of the Russian Federation. Russian authorities fear that should one republic gain

autonomy, this could lead to a domino effect that in turn could bring about the disintegration of the Russian Federation. The US "war on terror" narrative thus helped to legitimize Putin's tight grip on these separatist republics, framing the fight in the Northern Caucasus as a part of the global war on terrorism. The current crises in Syria and Iraq have placed Afghanistan in the shadow with regards to Russia-US counter-terrorism cooperation. However, as we note in the fight against IS, terrorism is one of the few issues prompting Russia to support Western foreign interventions, the same way Russia and the West agreed to topple the Taliban regime back in 2001.

Russia's wish to keep the Central Asian republics safe from "the Afghan threat" is also imperative to the Russia-Afghanistan relationship. The Central Asian republics Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan all border Afghanistan, and many Russians have remained in these republics following the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia is the prime destination for illegal exports of drugs from Afghanistan through Central Asia. Uzbeks and Tajiks are the second and third largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan, and many citizens from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan also work in Russia. Russia shares the Central Asian republics' concern over the threat posed by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which was behind attacks in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley (1999) and in the capital Tashkent (2000). The IMU later sought refuge in the tribal area of Pakistan, where it remained until 2014, when the Pakistani army launched a campaign that forced the group to relocate to Afghanistan. However, as we may note in other "hot spots" in the world, Russia's relations with Afghanistan's different factions are largely dictated by the main reference point for Russian foreign policy and identity: the West.

Seizing the Opportunity

The fall of the Taliban in 2001 and the US-Russia counter-terrorism consensus represented a window for Moscow to assert influence in Kabul, and Russia-Afghanistan relations were immediately strengthened. President Hamid Karzai visited Moscow twice in 2002, and Russia agreed to provide military equipment and training to the Afghan Security Forces. During Karzai's visit to Moscow in 2002, the Russian and Afghan governments signed 17 bilateral



Ashraf Ghani and Vladimir Putin meeting in Ufa in July 2015 to discuss the possibilities for cooperation between Russia and Afghanistan. Photo: kremlin.ru

agreements. Gazprom and 15 other Russian companies declared their readiness to invest in Afghanistan. Between 2002 and 2009, however, Russia only sent aid to Afghanistan worth 40 million USD, constituting only 0.4 percent of the total donor assistance to the country. Between 2002 and 2005, Russia aided Afghanistan with free military hardware, training and logistical services worth 30 million dollars a year. The total amount of Russian funding to the domestic Afghan security sector is actually quite significant. In the period 2002–2009, Russia contributed a total amount of 109 million USD, constituting 3.7 percent of the total donor amount. In comparison, EU institutions donated 84.3 million USD in the same period. Trade investments remained limited in this period, and failed to yield any significant results.

From 2005 onwards, the waning relationship between Russia and the West colored Russia's policies on Afghanistan. Russia perceived the Karzai government as pro-Western, and Moscow suspected US compliance in the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003/2004. As a result, Russia froze all military aid to Afghani-

stan in 2006. In the US, the tone on the Afghan leadership gradually harshened. After Obama came to power in 2009, the Obama administration publicly criticized the Karzai government for being corrupt and ineffective, and eventually declared that the US would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. At the same time, Russia-US relations cooled further after the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. These circumstances may be read as a cause for the reboot in the Russia-Afghanistan relationship. In 2009, the Afghan government published a letter exchange between Medvedev and Karzai, which sent a clear message that Kabul was seeking to diversify its foreign relations beyond the US. However, both the US and NATO still managed to maintain a constructive dialogue with Russia on Afghanistan. At the NATO Lisbon Summit in 2010, Russia offered to facilitate the transport of NATO equipment to Afghanistan through Russia, overcoming the dependence on Pakistan. This agreement was expanded at the NATO summit in Chicago 2012, with arrangements through Central Asian territory and Russia, which would allow multi-modal reverse transits. However, both Russia's and

Afghanistan's relations with the US worsened significantly from 2012 onwards, as we shall see in more detail below.

Russia and Afghanistan Unite in Opposing the US

In line with the deteriorating relationship between Kabul and Washington, trade between Russia and Afghanistan advanced rapidly. From 571.3 million USD in 2010, it grew to 985 million in 2011 and amounted to 1 billion USD in 2013. In 2014, Russia was the fifth largest importer of goods from Afghanistan, and the sixth largest exporter to the country. A major deterioration in the US-Afghanistan relationship was noted in 2014, laying the basis for a further strengthening of the ties between Russia and Afghanistan. In the words of the former UN Special Envoy to Afghanistan Kai Eide, Karzai's 'desire to take revenge seemed to have gained the upper hand in his relationship with the US'. For Karzai, this revenge manifested itself in an outreach to Russia. Karzai visited the Sochi Olympics in February 2014, games that several Western states boycotted. From a Western view-

point, perhaps the single most provocative act was Karzai's expression of support for Russia's annexation of Crimea. Karzai later explained that his support for Russia's annexation came from his 'experience with working with Western governments'.

Kabul's interest in Russia has seemingly persisted after Afghan President Ashraf Ghani came to power in 2014. Ghani visited Russia during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) summit in the summer of 2015, where he held direct talks with President Putin. Both Presidents affirmed that they view each other as partners, and share common interests in stabilizing Afghanistan and in fighting terrorism. The current Vice President of Afghanistan, Abdul Rashid Dostum, is of strong significance for the current rapprochement. As has been noted, Dostum has visited Moscow and Chechnya during the last year, and has requested weapons and other military support from Russia. Dostum has a long history with Russia, as he also fought on the side of the PDPA during the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s. Dostum was a militia commander for the Afghan government, leading the infamous Uzbek-militia, often referred to as Gilam Jam (carpet snatchers). For Russia, Dostum represents a possibility for influence at the very top of the Afghan leadership.

Concluding and Looking Ahead

- The main reference points for Russian policy in Afghanistan are most likely to be its relations with the West as well as its security interests in keeping Central Asian states safe from Islamist militants. As such, the West and Russia share an interest in Afghanistan, but cooperation is hindered by the unfolding tensions over Ukraine and Syria.

- Western states have redirected their efforts to Syria and Iraq, even more so following the attacks in Paris in November 2015. Although the Western presence in Afghanistan has diminished significantly since 2014, it remains, especially through the presence of US Special Forces. However, the Western troop withdrawal may give Russia greater leeway in asserting influence in Kabul.
- Russia holds a special knowledge on Afghanistan, due to its history and personal ties between different political figures in the two countries. These networks may function as a platform for influence, while simultaneously perpetuate the image that Russia is more distanced from Afghanistan than other regional players.
- Whether the current rapprochement between Russia and Afghanistan is a performance aimed at provoking the US or of more substantial character remains an open question. Most likely it is a combination, and there is reason to believe that Russia-Afghanistan relations will continue to improve in the years to come. ■

Notes

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