

# RUSSIA AS THE WEST'S ELUSIVE ALLY IN AFGHANISTAN

*The article examines Russia's Afghan policy in light of the tentative Russo-West rapprochement in the aftermath of the August War in Georgia. It juxtaposes Russia's regional interests and its global foreign policy agenda vis-à-vis the West in order to evaluate the true extent of Moscow's involvement in Afghanistan. The article concludes that lack of resources and clear Afghan strategy overshadowed by Russia's conflicting, and too often overambitious, foreign policy goals render Moscow as an unreliable partner who can offer the West very little in terms of tangible support in stabilizing post-Taliban Afghanistan.*

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In light of the latest leaks of secret Pentagon documents on the Afghan war, the security situation in Afghanistan looks gloomier than ever. The spotlights are now firmly fixed on NATO in general and the U.S. in particular.<sup>1</sup> With the deadline for the withdrawal of the Western troops looming large, the prosecution of the Afghan war is becoming a source of immense controversy in Western capitals.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, however, Afghan neighbors nervously position themselves to fill in a foreboding power vacuum should the West eject its troops from the country. Among the prospective new bidders is Russia who has time and time again intervened in the region's troubled history. Although Russia is likely to have a considerable say in how the future course of events in Afghanistan unfolds, Moscow's role in settling the Afghan quagmire can be best described as enigmatic.

From the point of view of the West, Moscow is part of both the problem and the solution. Following the falling-out over the war in Georgia, NATO and Russia have embarked on a fence mending exercise to repair their damaged relations. In the current atmosphere of the Russo-West thaw, Afghanistan, in particular, is hailed by many as a potential springboard for the new era in security cooperation between Russia and the West/NATO. In addition, the election of Democratic candidate Barrack Obama to the White House and the appointment of new NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, have paved the way for a more robust cooperation with Russia.

It is Afghanistan where bulk of tangible post-Georgia war cooperation has occurred. Although Moscow firmly rejects any notion of sending its troops, it can provide a wide array of indirect assistance to the Afghan government. As an alternative to restless northern Pakistan, Russia has promised to open up its air space and land routes to supply embattled NATO forces in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Russia and NATO countries have concluded a number of agreements for transport of lethal and non-lethal cargo across Russian territory. France, Germany and Spain have signed agreements with Moscow, which granted them transit through the Russian territory. In July 2009, Moscow and Washington concluded an agreement on transport of military hardware and supplies bound for the American troops fighting in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the July agreement has not yet been fully utilized.<sup>4</sup> However, problems persist in implementing existing agreements as Russia continues to accuse the U.S. and NATO from vacillating on the full utilization of transition provisions. In an interview for the *Kommersant* daily on 28 January 2010, the Russian

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<sup>1</sup> "U.S. says Wikileaks could 'threaten national security'," *BBC News*, 26 July 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-10758578>

<sup>2</sup> Sean Lengell, "White House: Afghanistan withdrawal deadline firm," *The Washington Post*, 20 June 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Beyond the Afghan Trauma: Russia's Return to Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2009), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Laruelle (2009), p. 10.

Ambassador to NATO expressed his frustration at the slow pace of approving necessary legislation to facilitate for the transit of NATO's non-lethal cargo through Russian air space.<sup>5</sup> Despite the sluggish progress, the U.S. has sounded upbeat on the long term prospects of the supply route through the Russian territory.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, NATO officials are quite eager to woo Moscow into supplying the Afghan army with military hardware. Given the rugged terrain in Afghanistan, the weapon of choice in the fight against the elusive Taliban is a transport helicopter. Relatively inexpensive and easy-to-maintain Soviet/Russian-made helicopters are ideally suited for the war in Afghanistan. During his first visit to Moscow, NATO Secretary Rasmussen extolled the possibility of a major Russian contribution of helicopters to the Afghan forces. The talks on this issue still continue. According to *RIA Novosti*, Russia considers finalizing the delivery of 27 helicopters to Afghanistan: "I hope that in a month or month and a half there will be more clarity on the issue," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Ivanov said on 18 August.<sup>7</sup> However, the concerns remain whether Moscow has the spare production capacity to deliver the promised helicopters on time.<sup>8</sup>

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On the one hand, it is correct to assume that Moscow has genuine interest in stymying the rise of religious extremism in Afghanistan, which threatens to spill over to Central Asia – Russia's self-perceived backyard. Hence, the interest of the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan and those of Russia seemingly coincide and offer a springboard for more robust cooperation. That said, however, some hard liners as well as geopolitical schemers in the Russian government remain wary of the continued Western military presence and by extension economic and political influence in Central Asia. Moreover, they reckon that should NATO's Afghan endeavor

<sup>5</sup> "Afghanistan "the basis" for rapprochement between Russia, NATO", *RT.com* – ROAR (<http://rt.com/Politics/2010-01-27/roar-afghanistan-russia-nato.html>), 27 January 2010.

<sup>6</sup> "US-Russia deal on Afghanistan is working: Ambassador," *AFP*, 20 January 2010, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gAZzc6t2ib\\_-MMF-cMB\\_c2511HFQ](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gAZzc6t2ib_-MMF-cMB_c2511HFQ)

<sup>7</sup> "Decision on Russian Mi-17 deliveries to Afghanistan to be made within 2 months – Russian FM", *Ria Novosti*, 18 August 2010.

<sup>8</sup> The author's interview with Andrei Zagorski in Moscow, July 2010.

end in a spectacular failure, this might lead to the unrevealing of the Alliance that is still seen as the proverbial thorn in the backside by Russian security hawks.

No wonder then that Russia's Afghan policy is a mix of regional and global ambitions, which are oftentimes mutually exclusive. This tremendously complicates Moscow's role, thereby limiting the scope to which Moscow can be an effective force for change in Afghanistan.

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There are two sets of primary considerations –short term and long term– behind Russia's Afghan policy. In the short run, Russia seeks to persuade the Afghan government and its Western allies to crack down on the booming drug trade. Over the past couple of years, Russia has transitioned from being a transit country to becoming a major importer of Afghan heroin and opiates. Out of about 100,000 drug addicts dying worldwide each year, between 30,000 and 40,000 are Russians.<sup>9</sup> For the Russian officials a massive inflow of drugs from Afghanistan, which floods the Russian market, is

deemed a security threat of highest order. Speaking at a conference on the future of Afghanistan in Kabul in July 2010, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Ivanov repeated his exasperated call for the intensification of the counter narcotics campaign.<sup>10</sup> Yet, Western troops remain quite reluctant to heed the call for fear of alienating the local populace which is economically dependent on the income from the drug trade.

Apart from its concern about drug trafficking, Russia remains reluctant to supply military hardware for free. For Russia the prospects of profiting from its trade with Afghanistan seem to trump long-term foreign policy considerations. Therefore, the Kremlin wants to supply the helicopters on a commercial basis rather than as a form of humanitarian assistance which is what the Western countries desire. Russian ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, quite explicitly asked for his country to be awarded hefty reconstruction contracts in Afghanistan in exchange for Moscow's support.

<sup>9</sup> Dmitri Trenin and Alexei Malashenko, *Afghanistan: A View from Moscow* (Moscow: Carnegie, 2010), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> "Lavrov: Rossija pomozhet Afganistanu v osnashhenii armii i policii," *Ria Novosti*, 20 July 2010, <http://www.rian.ru/politics/20100720/256577973.html>

In the long run, Moscow's Afghan policy is being shaped by its global agenda. Moscow tries to exploit its potential to help in Afghanistan and in its other dealings with the West, be it the ongoing talks on a new security landscape in Europe or arms reduction talks. Russia also pressures NATO to be granted a greater say in its strategic planning on Afghanistan. In other words, cooperation on Afghanistan serves Russia well as it enables it to advertize its cooperative attitude while castigating the West for the lack of deference for Russian concerns.

Additionally, Moscow's Afghan policy is being informed by the need to implement a more robust Central Asian policy. As part of its effort to stem the decline of its influence in former Soviet republics in Central Asia, Russia seeks to regain some ground in Afghanistan. To that end, Russia strives to promote the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Moscow-sponsored regional grouping comprising some of the post-Soviet republics, in its dealings with NATO.<sup>11</sup> By institutionalizing formal dialogue with the Alliance, Moscow hopes to strengthen the legitimacy of the CSTO. According to Moscow, Afghanistan lies in what Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov defined as a possible "CSTO zone of responsibility".<sup>12</sup> Russian officials have sent feelers to the Alliance, that the CSTO members may assist NATO with securing the Afghan-Tajik. So far, however, the Alliance has been rather reluctant to establish formal ties with the CSTO, much to the chagrin of Moscow.

Another aspect of this approach, set in Moscow's balance-of-power foreign policy outlook, has been the effort by the Russian officials to woo NATO into a sort of a gentlemen's agreement. This grand-scheme thinking exemplifies the realist school tradition in Russian foreign policy according to which Moscow adheres to the international relations concept of "spheres of influence".<sup>13</sup> The main thrust behind this policy is to preserve Russia's privileged sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space while making NATO foreswear expanding its role in the region, outside of its remit of responsibility. Russia fears that the Western anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan may be used as an excuse for the West to establish a permanent foothold in Central Asia. This has caused a great deal of anxiety within Russian leadership, thereby setting Moscow on a collision course with NATO in Afghanistan. In the past, Moscow has repeatedly pressured Central Asian leaders to evict Western military bases from their countries. Though having issued numerous calls on Washington to withdraw its troops from Central Asia, Russia does not seem fully determined to push for the departure of the Western troops lest Afghanistan

<sup>11</sup> Aleksandr Gabuev, "NATO zhalob i predlozhenii," *Kommersant*, 11 February 2010, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1319665>

<sup>12</sup> Vladimir Socor, "From CIS to CSTO: Can a Core be Preserved?" *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, Vol. 2, No. 125, 28 January 2005.

<sup>13</sup> This concept of Russia's sphere of influence in the CIS, for instance, appeared in President Medvedev's major foreign policy address deliver in the wake of the August War in Georgia in 2008; "New Russian world order: the five principles," *BBC News*, 1 September 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7591610.stm>

turn into a hotbed of violent extremism threatening Russia's southern border.<sup>14</sup> This approach is deeply flawed in that it robs the Russian leadership of a clear guidance as to how to devise a long-term Afghan strategy.

Lastly, Russia is not particularly fond of the current government of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul, which it sees as too pro-American. Some Russian officials even explain their reluctance to fully ally themselves with the NATO's effort based on their premonition that should NATO leave and the current pro-Western regime collapse then Russia would be in a difficult position to negotiate with whoever succeeds the Karzai's government.<sup>15</sup>

The bottom line is that Russia lacks economic and political resources to be a major player. What is worse is that the conflicting nature of Russia's Afghan policy renders Moscow as a difficult partner for the West to deal with. Russia attempts to utilize its Afghan policy to showcase its potentially helpful role in stabilizing the post-Taliban Afghanistan while extracting concessions from the North Atlantic Alliance and the United States. Therefore, Moscow purposefully subjugates its regional interests to strengthening its bargaining position with the West in general and the U.S. in particular. The question remains to what extent such a policy may bear fruit since even the Russian leadership remains torn between trying to help NATO in Afghanistan to rid itself of the threat of violent extremism on its southern tier, on the one hand, and seeking to preserve its geopolitical influence in the region while pursuing a great power foreign policy overshadowed by deep-seated suspicions of the West, on the other. Consequently, due to little initiative of its own and largely reactive policy, Moscow fails to raise its profile as a major broker in the international struggle for the future of Afghanistan and the neighboring countries.

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<sup>14</sup> Natalja Burlinova, "Uhod NATO iz Afganistana: kogda i kak?," *Afghanistan.ru*, 26 April 2010, <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/17241.html>

<sup>15</sup> Laruelle (2009), pp. 9-10.