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What Does Moscow Want in Afghanistan?

By Stephen Blank

(Professor Stephen Blank teaches at the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College and is a frequent contributor to *Perspective*.)

Afghanistan is the Obama Administration's most urgent foreign and defense policy issue. President Obama is considering coopting susceptible Taliban members into a new Afghan government, and the Administration even advocated and participated in an international conference on Afghanistan, held at the Hague on March 31, where Russia and Iran, among other interested parties, were represented in what has been noted as the "Obama administration's biggest overture so far" to Iran. (1) These policies confirm the dire situation in Afghanistan where President Obama, following numerous reports since 2008, concurs in the view that the US is not winning. (2) While Russia repeatedly has reiterated its desire to cooperate with the United States and has allowed the transit of non-lethal supplies through its territory, its attitude actually has been rather negative. (3) Earlier this year, Moscow combined intimidation (by means of a cyber-strike against the Kyrgyz state) with offers to relieve its economic decline by loans and buyouts of key Kyrgyz industries that produced naval weapons for the Soviet Union. Moreover, Russia continued exerting diplomatic pressure to secure the ouster of the US from its base at Manas in Kyrgyzstan. (4)

Nevertheless, Russia has several reasons not to want an American defeat in Afghanistan. This goes beyond the correct, but trite, observation that fundamentalist Islam, if victorious there, could then ignite a widespread destabilization of Central Asia. A Taliban victory would threaten not just the stability of the despotic regimes of Central

Asia, many of which are in serious trouble now because of the global economic crisis, it also would pose serious dilemmas to Russian foreign and defense policy.

First of all, it would endanger one of the foundations of Russia's economic and foreign policy, notably its ability to compel Central Asian energy supplies to flow primarily through Russia and then on to Europe, or simply to Russia itself, so that in effect Central Asia subsidizes Russia's energy consumption.

Second, a Taliban victory in Central Asia would put the onus of defending the region squarely on Russia's shoulders, and Moscow cannot bear that burden. Although Moscow steadily has built up its military capabilities in Central Asia to create an integrated land, sea, and air force, those forces, by Moscow's own admission, are not ready for contemporary warfare. Hence the current large-scale efforts at military reform that are running into trouble by virtue of the economic crisis. (5) While the purpose of these forces and those of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), is to defend Central Asia against foreign military threats, in fact the reality is less than it seems. The CSTO is just getting started and it is doubtful that its forces could be effective in combating a victorious Taliban and native insurgents. Although the CSTO claims that its forces will be used only for defense against foreign aggression and terrorism (as opposed to domestic uprisings against local governments) it is hard to see what else it could do, for it is hardly ready to tackle the Taliban. (6) We should remember that in 1999-2001, when the terrorist threat first materialized, Russia offered many promises but failed to deliver timely and effective material assistance to threatened Central Asian regimes, two of which then opted for US bases after 9/11. Since Russia has continued to fail to keep its promises of aid to states like Tajikistan and is unlikely to deliver the full aid it has promised to Kyrgyzstan, Moscow cannot afford to find itself in a situation where it then must deliver or lose positions in Central Asia. For this reason, it clearly prefers to have NATO and the US fighting in Afghanistan (also because it distracts them from Europe) to prevent a Taliban victory.

Another, and increasingly important Russian concern is the drug war that its politicians say is being waged upon it from Afghanistan. (7) President Medvedev has claimed that cooperating to shut down the growing drug trade is the most significant aspect of the conflict in Afghanistan. (8) Russian and Central Asian governments have been understandably critical of previous US policy regarding the drug trade and the protection of traffickers in the Afghan government, for that trade has wreaked havoc upon their countries. According to Viktor Ivanov, head of the Federal Narcotics Control Service, the production of opiates in Afghanistan has grown by 44 times since the deployment of US troops there in 2001. 250 youngsters become addicts daily and 30,000 persons a year, or 82 a day, die from Afghan heroin – double the number of losses in the Soviet-Afghan war of 1979-89. (9)

Not surprisingly, Ivanov and other officials repeatedly have demanded that NATO and US forces step up the campaign against the Afghan drug trade. (10) Some Central Asian analysts, e.g. the Kyrgyz analyst Leonid Bondarets, argue that the threat from Afghanistan is not one of fomenting insurgencies, but of narcotics, and he therefore calls for closing Central Asia's borders with Afghanistan. (11) But, this will not work unless the war is brought to a "victorious" conclusion. According to Ivanov, Russia is now the world's biggest heroin consumer and absolute leader in the opiate trade, and 90% of Russian addicts are hooked on Afghan heroin. Worse yet, there are some 2.5 million addicts out of 140 million Russians, and most of them are in the critical 18-39 year age bracket. Indeed, Ivanov claims that it is impossible to control the Russian-Kazakh border through which most of this heroin reaches Russia, thus shining a cold light on Bondarets' proposal. The situation in today's Russia resembles that of China at the turn of the 20th century, when almost a quarter of Chinese men consumed heroin and 5% were addicted. (12)

There are compelling reasons for Russian cooperation with the US on Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the desire to confront Washington and secure other goals has taken priority. The motivation for this stems partly from the current crisis, as Russia is attempting to forge a ruble union and economic bloc with the Central Asian states, in

order to shore up the ruble's value. But, it is pursuing this goal also in order to create an exclusive closed trading and economic bloc, not unlike Germany in the 1930s. (13) More specifically, it seeks to consolidate a Eurasian Economic Community as a single economic space—i.e. a trade, customs, and ruble bloc—and to intensify cooperation in key sectors, such as energy, intelligence, and the military-technical field. Russia's impetus for cooperation in these areas springs, in part, from an intention to prevent the Central Asian states from deepening their ties with China and the West. (14)

More to the point, Russia both pressured and bribed Kyrgyzstan into ousting the US from its base at Manas. (15) This made clear its intention to follow through on President Dmitriy Medvedev's claim that Russia has privileged interests and relations with CIS members to the exclusion of all other rivals. At the same time it demonstrated that the sovereignty of the Central Asian states and their right of free choice in military partners are of no importance to Moscow, compared to its own imperial interests. Third, for all its talk about a willingness to cooperate with Washington against terrorism, in fact, Russia regards the preservation of its neo-imperial patrimony as more urgent a task than the defeat of terrorism. (16) In other words, Washington cannot take at face value the oft-voiced sentiment that Moscow really wants cooperation with Washington against terrorism in Central Asia and Afghanistan. This argument merely projects American ideas concerning what Russia's interests should be onto the Russian government, and then plays them back to Washington audiences as if they were fact. Such mindless mirror-imaging cannot serve as an adequate basis for policy or strategy, especially since it finds no basis in what Russian leaders do or say. Russia does seek cooperation on Afghanistan, but only after ensuring that its imperial requirements, which can only promote greater instability across the region, come first. (17)

As General Charles Callwell (Victorian England's leading theorist of small wars) wrote, "theory cannot be accepted as conclusive when practice points the other way." (18) Indeed, for all its talk of cooperation, it appears Moscow actually fears that the US and NATO are losing in Central Asia and therefore seeks a hedge against that outcome, even as it seeks greater cooperation with them (albeit exclusively on its own terms). As

Fedor Lukyanov, Editor of *Russia In Global Affairs*, stated, “the consensus of Russian experts is that there is no winning strategy for the US and NATO in Afghanistan.” (19) Moreover, Moscow is now determined to act unilaterally to strengthen border defenses and defense ties with the Central Asian states, having determined that cooperation with NATO does not benefit it. (20) Indeed, many analysts in and out of the Russian government have argued that the US, having invaded Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11 and supposedly having failed to win in both, let loose the drug crisis that threatens Russia’s vital interests in the Caspian basin. (21)

Thus, when President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, sensing Washington’s loss of support for him, approached Moscow about arms sales to Afghanistan, it replied affirmatively, but stipulated that there must first be a political agreement between the two governments and that NATO and Russia must resume the dialogue broken during the war with Georgia. (22) In other words, Moscow’s interests, not surprisingly, take precedence over fighting terrorism. As an Afghan newspaper observed, “The Russian President’s letter to Karzai is a warning to the American government. Considering the recent American-Afghan disputes, Russians would not want to get involved in a weak game in Afghanistan by supporting a government that is in its last days. But, strategically, Russia wants to strengthen its presence in the region as a partner equal to America and NATO.” (23)

Sergei Rogov, Director of the prestigious and well-connected Institute for the Study of the USA and Canada in Moscow, has hinted what Russian agreement with the Karzai government and the Obama Administration about Afghanistan might mean. Speaking in Washington on January 13, 2009, he stated:

“The only way to achieve some stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan is to invite Russia to join the IFOR (International Forces there more commonly known as ISAF-author). Russia should accept responsibility for Regional Economic Reconstruction Teams in [the] Northern provinces. Russian teams should be supported by security personnel. The key problem will be to include Russia in the political decision-making

mechanism on Afghanistan while Russia remains a non-member of NATO. A possible solution may be giving additional functions to the NATO-Russia Council, or creation of [a] special body with decision-making authority. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan makes Russia very unenthusiastic about another engagement in this county. It will demand an extra effort from the new US Administration.” (24)

While Moscow may still have—or may profess to have—an Afghanistan syndrome and therefore will not send troops to the area, such ideas as a division of Afghanistan into spheres of responsibility and a new Russian military presence there as a leverage point to insert itself into NATO raise so many objections that they are non-starters for any serious discussion of the matter. Certainly, this is not an acceptable foundation for cooperation with the US on Afghanistan, as it would provide only a basis for either unending or future conflict. Indeed, Moscow confirms Henry Kissinger’s observation that the past conduct of Afghanistan’s principal neighbors does not augur well for a policy of restraint, opposition to terrorism, and we might add, non-intervention in its politics. (25)

But Rogov’s formula, plus Moscow’s decision to send military aid to Afghanistan also suggest Russia’s apprehension that the Taliban might win, thus leaving Russia to confront that movement with no means of dealing with it politically or of insulating Central Asia from it. Indeed, it is clear that Moscow is making every effort to enmesh the Central Asian regimes even further in various forms of economic, trade, and defense integration that would preclude them from being able to act effectively in defense of their own sovereignty. Likewise, Moscow’s abortive efforts to obtain approval from the Central Asian governments for its unilateral revisions of Georgia’s borders in August 2008 represent another sign of its basic contempt for their sovereignty, an attitude the Central Asian states seem to recognize. From the beginning of his tenure, Putin’s first priority, and one that remains Russia’s central foreign policy priority, is to establish an exclusive sphere of influence in the CIS and to revitalize the existing institutions of cooperation, or even create new ones in defense, intelligence sharing, and overall economic policy, including trade and energy. (26)

In conjunction with this overriding goal, Moscow called its own conference of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which met on March 27 to discuss Afghanistan. (27) It is clear that a primary aim of this conference, to which NATO sent two representatives, was to obtain NATO's recognition for the SCO as a legitimate and effective security interlocutor—and for the CSTO as the main military security provider in Central Asia—thus securing Russia's objective of excluding the Central Asian states from any direct independent dialogue with NATO and maintaining its position as their principal security interlocutor for them. (28) These are long-standing Russian aims, particularly regarding the CSTO. (29) Indeed, Medvedev sees the CSTO, especially its new rapid reaction force as becoming a "universal effective instrument" that ensures security throughout the whole former Soviet space. (30) Essentially, he wants NATO to accept the CSTO's military writ over the entire area and the SCO's political authority there as well, and thus to bow out of the picture in the CIS. This is not very different from the proposal made by then Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov in December 2006 for a division of Eurasia into spheres of influence with regard to peace operations and security guarantees. Ivanov then claimed that,

"The next logical step on the path of reinforcing international security may be to develop a cooperation mechanism between NATO and the CSTO, followed by a clear division of spheres of responsibility. This approach offers the prospect of enabling us to possess a sufficiently reliable and effective leverage for taking joint action in crisis situations in various regions of the world." (31)

Not only is this a frank call for spheres of influence and for Russia to create a security system akin to a solar system in which smaller neighboring states revolve around Russia, it also returns us to the strategic bipolarity of the Cold War, albeit in vastly changed conditions. (32)

From Russia's standpoint the SCO conference and the conference sponsored by the US should lead not only to NATO's acceptance of spheres of influence in Eurasia, they should also bring about an Afghan government consonant with traditional values (i.e.,

not an “imposed” democracy or any other kind of democracy for that matter), which will recognize the sphere of influence suggested by Rogov. (33) Whatever else the US is fighting for in Afghanistan, it is doubtful that this is the outcome it prefers, or what it has in mind when it advocates greater cooperation with Russia.

Source Notes:

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- (8) "Russia's Medvedev hopes for cooperation with USA on Afghan Settlement," *BBC Monitoring From Vesti TV*, January 24, 2009.
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- (11) Bishkek, *Bishkek Press Club*, in Russian, February 27, 2009, *FBIS SOV*, February 27, 2009.
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- (28) "SCO-sponsored conference on Afghanistan in Moscow," 27 Mar 09, ITAR-TASS via <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?NewsID=13728751&PageNum=0>; Moscow, *Interfax-AVN Online*, in English, March 2, 2009, *FBIS SOV*, March 2, 2009; Moscow, *ITAR-TASS*, in Russian February 25, 2009, *FBIS SOV* February 25, 2009; *FBIS SOV*, February 12, 2009.
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