



BULLETIN

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Editors: Sławomir Dębski (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Mateusz Gniazdowski,
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Afghanistan in Foreign Policy of Russian Federation

by Robert Śmigielski

Developments in Afghanistan are important for Russia, largely because of that country's interests in Central Asia. Seeking to retain its influence in the region, Russia is interested in neither ISAF's full success, nor its failure. But the opening of transport corridors for ISAF supplies demonstrates that the country is prepared to cooperate on a limited scale with NATO in Afghanistan, especially where this may bring benefits related to issues of priority importance for Russia (blocking NATO's enlargement, concluding disarmament talks with the US, strengthening the Collective Security Treaty Organisation).

Background. Russia currently has no immediate interests in Afghanistan which would require a major military or political involvement in the country's internal affairs. But Afghanistan is highly important for Russia strategically, due to its potential for Central Asia's destabilisation. An unruly internal situation, Islamist extremism and a growing illegal drug business pose a real threat to the post-communist regimes in Central Asia, upon which Russia has founded its influence in the region. In the absence of an effective protection of its border with Kazakhstan, Russia is also directly exposed to the infiltration of Islamist fundamentalism and drug trafficking. Another reason why Central Asia is important for Russia is its wealth of oil and gas resources. Internal stabilisation in Afghanistan (brought about by operations of the US and NATO-run coalition) would on the one hand reduce the threats of fundamentalism and illegal narcotics trade but, on the other, it would also made possible exports of Central Asian energy resources bypassing Russia, as well as widening US influence in the region.

Russia's Attitude to NATO Presence in Afghanistan. After 9/11 Russia backed the US-built anti-terrorist coalition. The country opened up its air space to meet the needs of the Afghanistan operation and it did not oppose the emergence of NATO bases in Central Asian republics. The defeat of the Taliban, providing a safe haven for Islamist extremists from Central Asia and the Caucasus, has suited Russian interests well. But this is not the case with the strengthening of US influence in Central Asia, as a result of the war on international terrorism. Russia is convinced that the US has not abandoned plans to build an energy transport corridor through Afghanistan, linking Central Asia with the Southern part of the continent, which would reduce the regional countries' dependence on Russia and help them reorient their respective foreign policies. In response, therefore, Russia has tightened up cooperation within the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Despite being often critical of NATO activity, Russia did sign a 4 April 2008 agreement, opening up a transport corridor through its territory to supply the ISAF mission. For NATO, an opportunity to carry non-lethal supplies by rail via Russia and Central Asia is attractive economically (costs at one-thirtieth of what would have to be paid for air transport) and politically (previously, 75% of Afghanistan supplies were going through unstable Pakistan). The agreement stood even when Russia and the Alliance suspended official relations in the aftermath of the Georgia war. But the traffic has been limited—and it is going to radically grow only after the recent (January 2010) signing of the last two agreements between NATO and transit countries (Kazakhstan, Belarus). Based on bilateral deals, Russia opened air corridors for the German, French and Spanish contingents, even allowing weapon shipments. Agreements with Sweden and Italy are planned to follow.

The Afghanistan operation has also become a major area of the reset policy, initiated in Russo-US relations by President Obama. Under an agreement signed during the Medvedev–Obama summit in July 2009, Russia consented to US military overflights. The practical value of the agreement, though, is restricted by a low intensity of transit traffic (much below the planned 4,500 overflights a year) due to e.g. bureaucratic impediments in Russia and absence of a similar deal with Kazakhstan. Air transport services for the ISAF forces in Afghanistan are being rendered by Russia companies, but the government rules out sending troops to the country.

Key Aspects of Russia–Afghanistan Cooperation. The major issue in bilateral relations now is the Afghan illegal narcotics business. With a threefold increase in the amounts of Afghan heroin reaching the Russian market after 2001, Russia has been critical of the effectiveness of anti-narcotics measures by the anti-terrorist coalition and the Afghan government. On Russia's initiative, in December 2005, the Russia–NATO Council adopted a programme to train narcotics control officers from Afghanistan and Central Asia. And an office of the Russian Federal Drug Control Service was opened in Kabul. But none of these measures is expected to produce immediate effects, given the Afghan economy's extensive dependence on the heroin business.

On the economic field, no breakthrough came with the 6 August 2007 agreement annulling Afghanistan's Soviet-era debt of more than €11 billion. Afghanistan expected the very scant bilateral economic contacts to intensify, and trade indeed rose from some US\$70 million in 2007 to US\$180 million in 2008 (with exports from Russia accounting for more than 90% of that total)—but the Russian government shows no interest e.g. in issuing guarantees for Russian investors, and this despite the fact that Russian companies have unique experience (dating back to the Soviet times) with operations in Afghanistan's energy sector, mining, construction, transport and agriculture.

Since the 1990s, Russia maintained close contacts with leaders of the Northern Alliance (opposing the Taliban) and post-communist politicians. After the August 2009 re-election, the country threw unequivocal support behind President Karzai, reflecting an absence of any viable alternative to his government (with the Northern Alliance's position weakening) and also Russia's support for the new US strategy in Afghanistan and a gradual tightening up of Afghan-Russian contacts under Karzai. Russia backs the Afghan government's dialogue with moderate Taliban, provided they discontinue any contacts with al-Qaeda, but it definitely opposes negotiations with the Taliban leaders and their allies accused of terrorism.

Prospects. Participation in the downfall of the Taliban regime and opening up of transit corridors for NATO demonstrates Russia's readiness for a limited cooperation with the Alliance in regulating the Afghanistan conflict. But very likely, transit will be used by the country to press NATO and its individual member states on matters of priority importance for Russia (such as the enlargement of the Alliance). The transit agreements and the demand for a more effective fight against the illegal drug business will make it possible for Russia to renew its proposal for a direct cooperation between NATO and the CSTO—something which the Alliance (and the US in particular) have so far evaded, as legitimating Russian military presence in Central Asia. Russia will play up the political peace process in Afghanistan and, in its capacity as neutral mediator, will promote the SCO as an institution capable of playing an important role in the country's economic reconstruction. Military cooperation with Afghanistan is likely to be resumed, embracing training and equipment supplies/repair services. This is because an increased effectiveness of Afghan forces may translate into a reduced NATO presence, which would only gladden Russia. In the immediate future, it will seek to consolidate its political influence in Afghanistan, and later the time will come for economic involvement.

The West's problems in Afghanistan were used by Russia to strengthen its influence in Central Asia and block attempts at opening new transport routes for energy sources which would provide an alternative to the Russian routes. But while seeking to keep Central Asia in its fold, Russia is not interested in a failure of the US and NATO in Afghanistan. This is because it has no political or military resources with which to replace the international force in its Afghanistan stabilising role. The optimal solution for Russia would be to keep Afghanistan in a state of limited instability and bring the CSTO and the SCO into the process of conflict regulation.