

NOREF Report

Russia, the U.S. and Drugs in Afghanistan

Ross Eventon

Executive summary

The U.S.-Russian relationship throughout Central Asia is one of intense rivalry, albeit with occasional politically opportune collaboration. As the two powers pursue their own political and military objectives, the relationship can often appear contradictory and confused, as co-operation exists simultaneously alongside competition involving vocal condemnation and criticism. This rivalry is especially evident in Afghanistan, and particularly in relation to the enormous levels of opium cultivation in that country since the U.S. invasion.

For both the U.S. and Russia, exploitation of the drugs issue has been an important means of achieving their respective aims. Washington's proclaimed "war on drugs" is quite transparently an aspect of counter-insurgency and shows little

regard for the actual level of drug production. In light of domestic policies, Moscow's claims of concern with Afghan opium flowing into the country are clearly disingenuous. The "drugs threat" instead serves as a mechanism for increasing Russia's engagement with Afghanistan and the Central Asian states.

As the U.S. seeks to establish a permanent presence, secure the authority of a client state in Afghanistan, and exert control over the future of the region, Moscow is using bilateral and regional mechanisms in an effort to counter Washington and become an influential player in Central Asia. Recent developments suggest that this "New Great Game" is approaching a crucial moment, with significant geo-strategic implications.

Introduction

The U.S.-Russian relationship throughout Central Asia is one of intense rivalry, albeit with occasional politically opportune collaboration. As the two powers pursue their own political and military objectives, the relationship can often appear contradictory and confused, as co-operation exists simultaneously alongside competition and involves vocal condemnation and criticism. This is particularly true in relation to the enormous levels of opium cultivation in Afghanistan since the 2001 U.S. invasion. For the U.S. and Russia, exploitation of the drugs issue has been an important means of achieving their aims.

The drugs trade in Afghanistan

Both the U.S. and Russia have a history of using warlords linked to drug trafficking to pursue political and military objectives, and the proliferation of opium production in Afghanistan is largely the result of Russian and U.S. intervention in the region.

Throughout the 1980s Soviet troops fought U.S.-backed *mujahideen* who were heavily involved in drug trafficking in a decade-long war that devastated the Afghan agricultural ecosystem and led to the adoption of poppy cultivation as a means of survival. The two decades that followed the 1979 Soviet invasion saw a 20-fold increase in opium production, as Afghanistan's "diverse agricultural ecosystem" containing over 60 food crops was transformed into "the world's first economy dependent on the production of a single illicit drug", in the words of Alfred McCoy, who has extensively documented the drugs trade in the region.¹ The continued fighting throughout the 1990s, massive displacement, severe droughts and the economic isolation of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan worsened the situation.

With its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the U.S. supported many of the same *mujahideen* groups – now called the Northern Alliance – to help overthrow the Taliban. These warlords had maintained their connections to the drugs trade: during the Taliban ban on opium cultivation in

2000, the section of the country controlled by the internationally supported Northern Alliance saw a tripling in production.² Prior to the U.S. invasion, the group's largest supporter was Russia, which was using the Tajik-, Uzbek- and Turkmen-dominated group to retain some form of influence in Afghanistan, protect the border of the Central Asian states from Taliban influence and limit the power of Pakistan, the primary supporter of the Taliban movement.

The U.S. "war on drugs" in Afghanistan

The new Afghan government that followed the overthrow of the Taliban was made up primarily of U.S.-backed warlords and domestic power brokers, all heavily involved in the drugs trade. In 2003 a Kabul-based diplomat noted candidly: "Without money from drugs, our friendly warlords can't pay their militias. It's as simple as that."³

U.S. concentration on the cultivation and trade of drugs in Afghanistan began in earnest in 2005, around the time of the Taliban's resurgence and their renewed involvement in the drugs trade. The genuine nature of the resulting "war on drugs" is undermined by the selective targeting of the insurgency's connection to the trade, the focus on supply-side measures proven to be largely ineffective and the lack of repercussions for international financial institutions known to be vital in laundering drug money profits.⁴

Any serious approach to confronting production would involve punishing Afghan allies, who have instead been supported or tolerated as the U.S. seeks to install a friendly regime in Kabul. Despite most of the drugs trade being conducted by U.S.-supported political allies, "war on drugs" initiatives have ignored these connections and focused on the Taliban, with eradication and interdiction efforts becoming an element of counter-insurgency strategy.⁵ Brookings

2 P. Harris, "Victorious warlords set to open the opium floodgates", *The Observer*, November 24th 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/nov/25/afghanistan.drugtrade>.

3 Cited in J. Mercille, "The U.S. 'war on drugs' in Afghanistan", *Critical Asian Studies*, vol 43, no. 2, 2011, pp 285-309, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2011.570569>.

4 Mercille, "The U.S. 'war on drugs' in Afghanistan", 2011.

5 V. Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs*, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2010.

1 A. McCoy, "Afghanistan as a drug war", Tom Dispatch, March 30th 2010, http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175225/alfred_mccoy_afghanista_as_a_drug_war.

Institution fellow Vanda Felbab-Brown observes that such selective interdiction signals to Afghan powerbrokers “that the best way to conduct the drug business in Afghanistan is to be a member of the Karzai government”.⁶

In 2009 the Obama administration increased the focus on interdiction and made the merging of the “war on terror” and “war on drugs” explicit, adopting a policy of assassinating drug traffickers with proven links to the insurgency, a move in direct contravention of the Geneva Conventions and quickly condemned by the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions.

These are not isolated developments. In the other outpost of the “war on drugs” in Colombia, U.S.-supported fumigation has almost exclusively targeted areas controlled by the guerrillas. Military aid under the guise of fighting drugs has modernised the Colombian Armed Forces and assisted the region’s closest U.S. ally with a brutal counter-insurgency campaign.⁷ Like Afghanistan, Colombia has witnessed a merging of the “war on drugs” and “war on terror”, albeit with little change in policies. A recent report acknowledged that “since 11 September 2001, some of the tactics and even the language of the ‘war on drugs’ and terror have started to become indistinguishable”, with worrying implications for international human rights law.⁸

Claiming that the Taliban are “narco-terrorists” has become an important part of the U.S. strategy in an attempt to maintain support for the decade long war and to allow for the use of drugs-related initiatives as an aspect of counter-insurgency. In fact, the Taliban’s renewed involvement with the trade around 2005 was itself a result of U.S. interdiction policies that “allowed the Taliban, now regrouped in Pakistan, to integrate itself back into the Afghan drug trade by providing needed protection to traffickers targeted by counter-narcotics efforts”, according to Felbab-Brown.⁹

6 V. Felbab-Brown, “War and drugs in Afghanistan”, *World Politics Review*, October 2011, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/10449/war-and-drugs-in-afghanistan>.

7 Forrest Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia*, London, Verso, 2006.

8 P. Gallahue, “Narco-terror: conflating the wars on drugs and terror”, *Essex Human Rights Review*, vol 8, no. 1, October 2011, <http://www.humanrightsanddrugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Gallahue-Narco-Terror.pdf>.

9 Felbab-Brown, “War and drugs in Afghanistan”, 2011.

Recently, the head of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Afghanistan was careful to omit the link between foreign forces and drug traffickers when he responded to this year’s increased opium production with the warning: “We cannot afford to ignore the record profits for non-farmers, such as traders and insurgents, which in turn fuel corruption, criminality and instability.”¹⁰ However, UNODC itself has acknowledged that the vast majority of Taliban income is from “non opium sources” and therefore reducing drug production would have a “minimal impact on the insurgency’s strategic threat”.¹¹

When assessing the “war on drugs” in Afghanistan, it seems reasonable to agree with the conclusion of one expert that “the so-called war on drugs is better seen as a rhetorical device used by the U.S. to facilitate overseas military intervention and the fight against insurgents opposed to U.S. policies in Afghanistan”.¹²

The Russian approach and the “drugs threat”

The result of this support for individuals involved in the drug trade, the discriminatory nature of drug eradication and interdiction efforts, and the continued fighting and subsequent poverty and instability have caused opium production to increase dramatically. Illicit opium originating in Afghanistan now accounts for about 90% of the world’s total production and, according to a recent UN report, cultivation is up 7% over last year.¹³ In terms of consumption, Europe is the world’s leading consumer market for drugs, with Russia second.¹⁴

10 *Washington Post*, “Insecurity and poverty: Afghan farmers increase cultivation of opium”, October 11th 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/citing-insecurity-and-poverty-afghan-farmers-increase-cultivation-of-opium-poppo/2011/10/11/gIQAB-4DqBL_story.html?wprss=rss_world.

11 UNODC (UN Office on Drugs and Crime), *Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational Threat of Afghan Opium*, October 2009, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghan_Opium_Trade_2009_web.pdf.

12 Mercille, “The U.S. ‘war on drugs’ in Afghanistan”, 2011.

13 T. A. Peter, “Afghanistan still world’s top opium supplier, despite 10 years of US-led war”, *Christian Science Monitor*, October 11th 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2011/1011/Afghanistan-still-world-s-top-opium-supplier-despite-10-years-of-US-led-war>.

14 UNODC (UN Office on Drugs and Crime), *World Drug Report 2010*, 2010, http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/UNODC_2010_WorldDrugReport.pdf. Russia accounts for 21% (70 metric tons) of the world’s annual heroin consumption. Europe takes in 26% and is third in use per capita.

Vocal Russian discontent with the flow of drugs from Afghanistan into the country began around 2007 and consistently sought to link Afghan heroin with, officials claim, the annual 30,000 domestic drug-related fatalities. Speaking at a conference on Drug Production in Afghanistan: A Challenge for the International Community, held in Moscow in early June 2010, Russian president Dimitri Medvedev declared: “We see drug addiction as significant, the most severe threat to the development of our country, to the health of our people.”¹⁵

Looking at Moscow’s policies, it is clear the proclamations of concern for domestic drug deaths are disingenuous. The government maintains drug policies that reject internationally recognised methods of treating and preventing drug use, and the result has been disastrous. The country’s per capita heroin consumption is the highest in the world, almost double that of its closest competitor, Iran.¹⁶ There are approximately 2 million injecting drug users in the country, of which an estimated 37% have HIV; in 2008, 370,000 registered HIV cases were officially recorded, but the number unregistered is assumed to be far higher. A recent study on drugs in Russia concluded: “By adopting policies and practices totally unsupported by scientific evidence and inquiry, officials in Russia have rendered Narcology [a sub-specialty of psychiatry from the Soviet era, which defines the scope of health activities with regard to alcohol and other drug use] and medical practice insensitive to the alarming rates and continued spread of HIV, with its dire morbidity and mortality rates in the Russian Federation, turning their backs on all the other health problems posed by opiate use and dependence itself.” The unwillingness of the Russian administration to adopt proven methods of addressing the problem is “an engine driving the HIV epidemic in Russia”, creating “one of the catastrophes in the history of HIV”.¹⁷

Regardless, Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister, stated at a recent drugs conference, “prevention of HIV among drug users should start with the coalition forces in Afghanistan bombing poppy fields to cut heroin supplies”.¹⁸ Any serious concern with the disastrous domestic drug situation would mean adopting policies long recognised by experts and international bodies to be effective in treating and preventing drug use, and confronting both the corruption that facilitates drug trafficking and the socio-economic conditions that underlie drug use. This supply-country focus is well recognised as an ineffective method of preventing drug-related deaths, but, crucially, in the drugs issue, Moscow has a means of vocally castigating the occupying forces while increasing its interaction with the Afghan state and diverting attention away from the extent to which domestic policies are to blame for Russian addiction levels. Crucially, it was drugs that facilitated the first return of personnel to Afghanistan since the Soviet withdrawal, when the U.S. allowed Russian involvement in a joint raid on a drugs laboratory in October 2010.

At the June 2010 conference, Moscow proposed its own plan ostensibly to tackle cultivation in Afghanistan, entitled Rainbow 2, which called for greater eradication – possibly using chemical spraying and air strikes – to reduce poppy plantations by at least 25%, coupled with economic development initiatives aimed at “creating the infrastructure ... for the energy and electricity industries as well as creating a sufficient number (at least 2 million) of jobs for Afghan citizens”. The plan also included a proposal for a UN Security Council resolution to label “the Afghan drug threat as a threat to international peace and security”, a measure that could possibly lead to sanctioned military interventions to prevent drug production.¹⁹ The adoption of the plan would mean far greater involvement for Russia and constitute a political coup. However, not only is the proposal not viable if confronting drug cultivation is the goal, but Moscow must have been aware that Washington would never agree to such an initiative. As the U.S. and NATO stated in their rejection of the idea,

15 Dimitri Medvedev, “Speech at the conference on Drug Production in Afghanistan: A Challenge for the International Community”, Moscow, June 2010, cited in Alexei Anishchuk, “Russia calls for crusade on Afghan drugs, US tepid”, Reuters, June 9th 2010, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2010/06/09/idINIndia-49176220100609>.

16 UNODC, *World Drug Report 2010*, 2010.

17 R. Elovich and E. Drucker, “On drug treatment and social control: Russian narcology’s great leap backwards”, *Harm Reduction Journal*, vol 5, no. 3, 2008, <http://www.harmreductionjournal.com/content/5/1/23>.

18 A. Jack, “Russia offers aid to help neighbours fight HIV”, *Financial Times*, October 17th 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/45a3cafc-f5b8-11e0-bcc2-00144feab49a.html#ixzz1c2bcedm3>.

19 Russian Federation, “Russia’s Plan – Rainbow 2 – for the Elimination of Afghan Drug Production”, 2010, http://www.unodc.org/documents/afghanistan/Events/Russian_Plan_Rainbow_2.pdf.

they had learnt from experience that destroying the livelihoods of small-scale farmers gave the latter few options for survival and drove them towards the insurgency.

In October last year, reportedly after a year of pressure from Moscow, the U.S. agreed to include Russian personnel in a raid on a drugs laboratory in Afghanistan. The head of Russia's drug control agency, Viktor Ivanov, called the operation "an unprecedented show of joint efforts in order to combat drug traffic from Afghanistan".²⁰ The joint raid was a politically opportune collaboration rather than a concerted joint effort to confront drug production.

The vocal Russian condemnations are a means of placing pressure on the U.S. and NATO forces and attempting to garner greater influence in the drugs debate. As with the U.S., the "drugs threat" has provided Moscow with a useful mechanism for pursuing other objectives.

Contact points

While Russia and the U.S. are both playing a double game in relation to the drugs issue, it is important to recognise that they have shared goals in Afghanistan. Both support the Afghan state and attempts to pacify the Taliban, and Russia has little interest in disrupting U.S. efforts. As one U.S. military analyst notes, "the Kremlin often uses harsh language in criticising Western foreign policy initiatives, but in the final analysis, it rarely backs its caustic words with punishing actions".²¹ It should be recalled that Moscow supported the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the later UN Security Council resolution creating the International Security Assistance Force. The U.S. war was welcomed because it would remove the Taliban and give greater power to the Russian-backed Northern Alliance. The impact of Russian support for the war has not been insignificant. As the analyst further notes: "In taking stock of Russia's support for the U.S.-led military victory over the Taliban and al-Qaeda, it is apparent that

Moscow's help was critical. Without it, the United States would have had difficulty securing staging areas and corridors in Central Asia that facilitated an invasion from the North. Russia's flow of arms to the Northern Alliance was vital as well."²²

This tactical co-operation has continued. Russia supplies most of the fuel for NATO operations, with corresponding economic benefits for Russian corporations. Moscow also provides a vital conduit for NATO supplies bound for Afghanistan via what is known as the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). This is an increasingly important route, given the volatility of the roads through Pakistan, as evidenced by the high incidence of NATO convoys being attacked and burned in Pakistan. Although the Kremlin has here a powerful mechanism for leverage over the U.S. and NATO, its own desire to see the Taliban defeated and its support for the Afghan state have prevented it from seriously pressuring the U.S. to change its policies in Afghanistan. There are also enormous economic incentives for Russian companies, particularly those involved in cargo airlifts, as well as the political gain of its Central Asian transportation route being increasingly preferred over that of Pakistan. However, Moscow's attempt to create a formal relationship between the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) – the Russian-led political-military bloc – and NATO a condition of NDN military transit was rejected by NATO powers.

The NDN is now being expanded. Last year Russia agreed to revise the agreement to include the transit of armoured personnel carriers and the passage of equipment back to Europe. It is now rumoured that Moscow may be considering allowing lethal material to be included in NATO shipments over its territory. Moscow has also provided the Afghan state with equipment and training. Most recently, an agreement was reached for 24 Russian-made helicopters to be sold to Afghanistan, paid for by the U.S. These are important aspects of what has been termed the "reset" in U.S.-Russia relations, where the two countries' aims happen to coincide.²³

While NATO is becoming more reliant on Russia for supplies, Moscow has both economic and

20 *Russia Times*, "First Russia-US operation in Afghanistan hailed a success", October 29th 2010, <http://rt.com/usa/news/russia-us-hero-in-afghanistan/>.

21 R. J. Krickus, "The Afghanistan question and the reset in US-Russian relations", Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, October 2011, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/download.cfm?q=1089>.

22 Krickus, "The Afghanistan question", 2011.

23 Krickus, "The Afghanistan question", 2011.

political incentives to oblige. The aid to the U.S. war effort also serves a double purpose: assisting with the fight against the Taliban while creating more contact points between Moscow and Kabul. Tactical considerations mean that the U.S. and Russia collaborate in supporting Karzai and the Afghan regime, but they are simultaneously engaged in fierce competition for influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Rivalry

Although Moscow supports the war in Afghanistan, this has included caveats. Officials regularly state that the U.S. and NATO should aim to build up Afghan security forces to the point where they can act independently, and then withdraw from the country and the other Central Asian states. However, recent reports suggest that the U.S. is determined to maintain some form of military presence in the country and to retain its influence with the Afghan administration when Karzai steps down next year.²⁴

Afghanistan and the Central Asia region are vitally important for both Russia and the U.S. Afghanistan is a land bridge for providing energy-starved South Asia with natural gas from energy-rich Central Asian states near the Caspian Sea. Control of these energy flows means substantial political leverage, as well as profits.

The *Financial Times* of London acknowledged recently that the aim for the occupying powers in Afghanistan is “to establish a client state with a semblance of democracy”.²⁵ This would mean a possible permanent presence, in “the strategic high plateau that overlooks Russia, Iran and China”.²⁶ The U.S. is currently negotiating with the Afghan government in order to secure some form of long-term basing agreement. This aim was apparent as far back as 2001, when Elizabeth Jones, the U.S. assistant secretary of state, noted that “when the Afghan conflict is over we will not

leave Central Asia. We have long-term plans and interests in this region”.²⁷ Approximately 400 U.S. and coalition installations are now in Afghanistan itself, including camps, forward operating bases and combat outposts, which are essentially garrisoning the country.

The U.S. has started its own initiatives to become an influential actor regarding Central Asian energy flows. In September 2007 Richard Boucher, U.S. assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian Affairs, articulated these aims: “One of our goals is to stabilize Afghanistan so it can become a conduit and hub between South and Central Asia so that energy can flow to the south ... and so that the countries of Central Asia are no longer bottled up between the two enormous powers of China and Russia, but rather that they have outlets to the south as well as to the north and the east and the west.”²⁸

During the regime of the warlord Burhanuddin Rabbani in the early 1990s and later during the rule of the Taliban, the U.S. encouraged the proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which will transport gas from the Caspian to South Asia, bypassing Iran and Russia. The pipeline was delayed, but has recently been endorsed by the Afghan parliament. Construction, which will involve a U.S. corporation, is scheduled to begin next year.

Moscow’s reaction to these developments escalated around 2007, seemingly as a result of the approaching U.S. withdrawal and the resurgence of the Taliban insurgency, which has showed signs of spreading northwards towards the border with the Central Asian states. Interaction with Kabul has increased greatly since the invasion. Since 2001 Russia has sent humanitarian aid and provided the Afghan state with equipment, training and intelligence. Karzai’s historic visit in 2011, the first by an Afghan leader since the late 1980s, began a year of increased co-operation. During the year, Moscow cancelled almost \$12 billion of debt owed by Afghanistan and donated 20,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles and 2.5 million

24 B. Farmer, “US troops may stay in Afghanistan until 2024”, *The Telegraph*, August 19th 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/asia/afghanistan/8712701/US-troops-may-stay-in-Afghanistan-until-2024.html>.

25 L. Barber, “The Afghan misadventure”, *Financial Times*, July 22nd 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/0feac042-b395-11e0-b56c-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1bd0wmWbl>.

26 M. K. Bhadrakumar, “Pipeline project a New Silk Road”, *Asia Times*, December 16th 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/LL16Df01.html.

27 Cited in D. Stokes, “Rethinking US empire and oil imperialism”, Znet, August 2007, http://www.zcommunications.org/rethinking-us-empire-and-oil-imperialism-pt-4-by-doug-stokes?toggle_layout=yes;

28 Richard Boucher, “Speech at the Paul H. Nitze School for Advanced International Studies”, September 20th 2007, <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rm/2007/94238.htm>.

cartridges to the Afghan Interior Ministry. Russia also finalised a number of arms sales and energy agreements, including an economic co-operation agreement to increase levels of bilateral trade and an agreement to assist the country with a number of “priority economic projects” such as infrastructure, hydroelectric dams and “affordable housing”.²⁹

Moscow has also exploited tensions between Washington and Kabul to show support for Karzai. Russian officials have criticised civilian deaths in Afghanistan caused by NATO operations, no doubt scoring political points with Karzai, who has often expressed similar sentiments. The U.S., meanwhile, publicly condemned the Afghan leader as “a bad partner” because of his outspokenness. These kinds of statements have largely abated since Karzai began increasing his interaction with the regional states, and a senior U.S. general was recently removed for openly criticising the Afghan leader.

Russia recently reversed its stance regarding the TAPI pipeline and has offered to join the project, opting out of an Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline that analysts consider to have been scuppered after the U.S. pressured India to pull out. Russia may be supporting the TAPI pipeline project because it diverts Central Asian gas away from Europe and China, markets that Russia hopes to supply. The decision appears to have followed the creation of the Kazakhstan-China pipeline, and the natural gas company Gazprom has now opened talks with Turkmenistan concerning the company’s involvement in the project. This would not only mean profits for Gazprom, but also greater influence in Turkmenistan, where Russia is attempting to combat the creation of a U.S.- and European Union (EU)-supported Nabucco natural gas pipeline project. Supplied in part with gas from Turkmenistan, the proposed pipeline would connect Turkey and Austria in order to lessen Europe’s dependence on Russian energy.

Moscow has sought to use regional bodies, namely the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the CSTO, to exploit the illegal drug production in Afghanistan and increase its influence in the region. As a result of Russian initiatives, there are regular consultations in both organisations on the “Afghanistan question”. Russia now undertakes joint training exercises and other forms of co-operative military actions with a number of regional countries, based on the “drugs threat” and the “security risk” from Afghanistan. These initiatives have increased greatly in the past four years as Moscow’s “concern” over the drugs issue has grown. In the light of broader policies related to drugs, these concerns are difficult to take seriously. Many of these initiatives are justified by the security threat from radical groups, something Russian officials are eager to emphasise as some form of partial NATO withdrawal approaches.

In order to justify continued intervention, both Russia and the U.S. are claiming that Afghanistan represents a threat to their countries and that their presence is required to ensure “stability”, although the evidence is not convincing.

U.S. policies in Afghanistan are recognised to be both exacerbating the terror threat to the domestic population and destabilising Pakistan.³⁰ Similarly, Russia’s claims to be concerned with Taliban influence in the wider region are contradicted by the strictly national focus of the group. Instead, it seems credible in light of recent developments that “Russia doesn’t actually believe the U.S. will ever leave Afghanistan, and is ginning up the threat from Afghanistan in order to intimidate the governments of Central Asia into rallying behind the Kremlin”.³¹ According to one Russian journalist, “[w]hat we’re seeing now is PR, preparation for this period [when the U.S. leaves]” in order to “prepare popular opinion, internal Russian popular opinion and also Central Asian popular opinion, to accept the inevitability of Russian security measures”.³² In September the

29 Alexei Anishchuk, “Karzai courts Moscow with economic projects”, Reuters, January 21st 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/01/21/uk-russia-afghanistan-idUKTRE70K30020110121>; Amie Ferris-Rötman, “Russia eyes bigger role in Afghanistan, wants to rebuild: envoy”, Reuters, June 17th 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/17/us-afghanistan-russia-idUSTRE75G-1PN20110617>.

30 On how the U.S. continues to use policies in Afghanistan that are contrary to its officially stated aims, see Afghan Study Group, *A New Way Forward: Rethinking US Strategy in Afghanistan*, report, 2011, <http://www.afghanistanstudygroup.org/read-the-report/>.

31 *The Atlantic*, “Withdrawal from Afghanistan could kill the U.S.-Russia ‘reset’”, October 26th 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/sponsored/zurich/archive/2011/10/withdrawal-from-afghanistan-could-kill-the-us-russia-reset/247357/>.

32 Cited in *The Atlantic*, “Withdrawal from Afghanistan”, 2011.

CSTO held military exercises in Tajikistan on the premise of being prepared to confront “instability” after NATO withdraws from Afghanistan. However, the Russian chief of the General Staff, Nikolai Makarov, also acknowledged that the exercises could serve another purpose: the suppression of Middle East-style uprisings in the Russia-friendly former Soviet states.³³

Within the SCO, Moscow and Beijing have co-operated to draw Afghanistan away from a dependence on the U.S. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov confirmed in May that Afghanistan had made a formal request for SCO observer status, an announcement that came closely on the heels of a four-day visit by the Afghan foreign minister to China. With President Karzai in attendance, Russian president Medvedev used the occasion to announce: “Russia is calling for more intensive and deeper cooperation between the SCO and Afghanistan.” Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev added: “It is possible that the SCO will assume responsibility for many issues in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of coalition forces in 2014.”³⁴ The SCO has also asked the U.S. to put a timetable on the removal of its forces and bases from Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Another important aspect of the SCO is the group’s effort to create co-operative links between energy producers and the region’s consumer states. The emergence of such a powerful energy bloc could have significant geo-political implications. Vladimir Putin recently confirmed that Russia would be providing \$500 million in financing for a project to provide Afghanistan and Pakistan with electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. On announcing the agreement, the Russian prime minister stated: “We support the idea of setting up the SCO energy club” and added that the decision to create such a grouping had already been made within the organisation.³⁵ This is particularly worrying for Washington, which had a previous request for SCO observer status denied,

33 R. Vorobyov, “Civil unrest could lead to CSTO reformation”, *The Telegraph*, November 16th 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/russianow/politics/8803773/Civil-unrest-CTSO.html>.

34 Pepe Escobar, “Beijing and Moscow beyond the SCO summit”, *Al Jazeera*, June 22nd 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/06/2011620115216348413.html>.

35 V. Radyuhin, “Russian power boost for Afghanistan, Pakistan”, *The Hindu*, November 7th 2011, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/article2606986.ece>.

has desperately tried to steer Karzai away from such alliances and is determined to prevent the development of a powerful independent regional body.

Central Asia

The “war on terror” has greatly increased the level of U.S./NATO interaction with the authoritarian regimes of the Central Asian states, long considered by Russia to be part of its “sphere of influence”. These energy-rich countries, particularly Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, were recently found by an International Crisis Group study to be close to collapse due to failing infrastructures and aging workforces.³⁶ They are receiving growing attention from the U.S., the EU and China, gradually eroding Russian predominance. Perhaps unsurprisingly, both Russia and the U.S. have claimed that their presence in the Central Asian states will bring “stability”.

Here, the rivalry has been open. Citing the “drugs threat” and the need to respond militarily, the Russian leadership has utilised the drugs issue in Central Asian states in much the same way as the “war on drugs” has facilitated the projection of U.S. power and influence in Latin America. There have also been discussions to create counter-drugs units within the Russian army that could operate outside the country in the same way as “the long-standing counter-drug operations conducted by the U.S. Armed Forces in Latin America”, according to RiaNovosti, the Russian news agency.³⁷

In Kyrgyzstan, the U.S. airbase at Manas has been an issue of contention. In 2005 Moscow contended that “the tulip revolution” that overthrew the authoritarian regime of pro-Russian Askar Akayev was the result of U.S. interference. It was a year in which both Russia and China expressed concern about the airbase at Manas and had made statements that they sought to have it removed. In 2009 the Kyrgyz government terminated an agreement on the stationing of

36 International Crisis Group, “Central Asia: decay and decline”, February 3rd 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/201-central-asia-decay-and-decline.aspx>.

37 RiaNovosti, “Army to fight drug trafficking”, September 28th 2010, <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20100928/160752316.html>.

U.S. troops, reportedly as a result of Russian pressure. Russian officials later announced a deal in which Kyrgyzstan, which also hosts a Russian base, would receive a \$2 billion loan on the condition that U.S. forces were made to leave the country. The dispute ended with a revised mandate and higher fees for the U.S. Recently, Kyrgyzstan's president-elect has stated that the U.S. airbase should be closed at the end of the present agreement in 2014 because it puts the country at risk "of retaliatory strikes from those in conflict with the United States".³⁸

Also, Moscow is currently pressuring Tajikistan to allow some 3,000 Russian troops into the country to engage in "border defence", ostensibly to assist in stopping the flow of drugs along the route. Such interdiction efforts are notoriously ineffective; UNODC's recorded interdiction rates along this route are extremely low, around 4-5%.³⁹ The proposal is therefore more likely seen as a mechanism to increase the Russian troop presence and shore up influence in Central Asia. On October 22nd U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton visited Tajikistan and stated that the U.S. would be willing to provide training and equipment for border troops and the anti-narcotics agency in the country. In 2007 the U.S. gave \$1 billion in aid to Tajikistan, an amount one-and-a-half times the size of the government's budget. There is also competition from China and Iran. Two days prior to Clinton's visit, Ali Larijani, the chairman of Iran's parliament, had been in Tajikistan discussing economic co-operation. Also, China has become increasingly involved in economic relations with the country. There are similar developments in Turkmenistan, a country that has remained relatively neutral, but is being courted by both the EU and China to lessen their dependence on Russian natural gas.

In Uzbekistan, a vital component of the NDN, Russia also has a military presence, this time under the auspices of the SCO's Anti-Terrorism Centre. A U.S. base was closed in 2005 by the Uzbek leadership, again reportedly as a result of Russian pressure, although Tashkent has since

agreed that NATO forces can use the country as a transit point. The U.S. Congress is currently considering a law that will allow the U.S. to provide military aid to Uzbekistan, suspended since 2004 because of the country's human rights record, which has shown little sign of improvement.

Exemplifying the competition, earlier this year in Kazakhstan, an informal CSTO summit was held at the same time as a military exercise involving the U.S. and Britain. Further exercises are expected in order for Astana to determine the "level of compatibility of the NATO member-states".⁴⁰ Likewise, Beijing has sought to secure energy markets throughout Central Asia and even raised the possibility of a military base in Pakistan, ostensibly to counter Uighur separatism. Russian and Chinese troops have also undertaken joint military exercises, no doubt watched carefully by Washington.

The future

The U.S. is currently negotiating an agreement with Kabul to secure some form of permanent presence in the country, and Afghanistan is set to receive \$2.7 billion worth of military equipment over the course of this year in an attempt to cement the authority of the U.S.-backed regime. This decision to maintain military bases and troops on the ground may have ended any prospect for peace and negotiations with the Taliban, who demand the removal of foreign forces as a precondition for any peaceful settlement.

The U.S. and NATO's decision to maintain a permanent presence and to continue the war will exacerbate the poverty and insecurity that underlie Afghan drug production. While Russia does not have significant influence on the Afghan situation, it was reported recently that "Russia plans to step up its international role in fighting infectious disease across eastern Europe and central Asia, in what some observers see as the latest effort by the Kremlin to reassert its political influence over its former Soviet neighbours". The initiative has "raised concerns that it would export its own hard-line attitude towards drug users, which has undermined efforts to slow the growth

38 P. Leonard, "Kyrgyz election winner says US base poses risk", *Boston Globe*, November 1st 2011, http://www.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2011/11/01/kyrgyz_election_winner_says_us_base_poses_risk/?rss_id=Boston.com+%2F+Boston+Globe++World+News.

39 UNODC, *Addiction, Crime and Insurgency*, 2009.

40 M. K. Bhadrakumar, "CTSO all dressed up, nowhere to go", *Asia Times*, August 17th 2011, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/MH17Ag01.html.

of the epidemic”.⁴¹ These actions will exacerbate drug problems, but that has been shown to be of little concern to Washington and Moscow as they pursue political and military objectives. A worsening drug situation will, however, provide further pretexts for interference based on the “drugs and security threats”.

Rivalry between Russia and the U.S. seems likely to intensify. The recent conference on Afghanistan in Istanbul was instructive and suggests that regional countries are resisting U.S. efforts to secure a role for NATO in the region. While Western powers attempted to ensure some form of regional security setup that would include an institutionalised role for NATO, a proposal from Russia on regional co-operation found greater favour. Crucially, the SCO now looks set to include India and Pakistan as full members, further undermining Washington. Such developments mean that the “New Great Game” is reaching a decisive moment, with substantial geo-strategic implications for Russia, the U.S and the region.

⁴¹ Jack, “Russia offers aid”, 2011.

Further reading

A. Armenta, M. Jelsma, T. Blickman & V. Montañés, *Merging Wars*, Transnational Institute, December 2001, <http://www.tni.org/briefing/merging-wars>.

P. Gallahue, “Narco-terror: conflating the wars on drugs and terror”, *Essex Human Rights Review*, vol 8, no. 1, October 2011, <http://www.humanrightsanddrugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Gallahue-Narco-Terror.pdf>.

M. Menkiszak, *Russia’s Afghan Problem: The Russian Federation and the Afghanistan Problem since 2001*, Centre for Eastern Studies, September 2011, http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/PRACE_38_en.pdf.

J. Mercille, “Drugs and Afghanistan”, *Counterpunch*, November 2009, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/11/06/drugs-and-afghanistan>.

J. Mercille, “The U.S. ‘war on drugs’ in Afghanistan”, *Critical Asian Studies*, vol 43, no. 2, 2011, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2011.570569>.

