



Afghanistan: the view from Russia

by Józef Lang

Russia's current and foreseeable policy towards Afghanistan is multi-vector, complex and shows, at times, signs of incoherence. Russia views developments in Afghanistan as a strategic challenge and is expressing growing concern over the prospects for stability in the country after the withdrawal of ISAF forces by the end of 2014. Russian decision-makers fear that a security vacuum emerging after the withdrawal could destabilise Central Asia and have a negative impact on Russia itself. At the same time, Moscow is concerned with Western military presence in the region, which it regards as interference in its neighbourhood. At tactical level, Russia also sees the situation in Afghanistan as an opportunity to secure its interests both regionally (consolidating its influence in Central Asia) and more widely (in terms of its relations with NATO).

Moscow's strategic priority

Russia's main goals in Afghanistan are stabilising the situation domestically and limiting threats which may emerge from the country. Moscow has shown a pragmatic approach in accomplishing these, as illustrated by its support to former enemy Ahmad Shah Massoud during the war the Northern Alliance fought against the Taliban before 2001. After the fall of the Taliban regime, Russia tried to establish good working relations with the Karzai administration as well as knit Afghanistan into various regional frameworks – through heads of states meetings involving Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan as well as, more recently and in cooperation with China, through the Shanghai Cooperation

Organisation (where Afghanistan has observer status since 2012). Having already collaborated with India on supporting the Northern Alliance during the 1990s civil war, Russia is apparently attempting to develop cooperation on Afghanistan with both India and China – as proved by a trilateral high-level security meeting held in Beijing on 16 January.

There are several threats to Russia originating from Afghanistan, with drug trafficking being the most tangible one. Russian decision-makers highlight illegal drug abuse in Russia as one of the main problems with which the country is confronted – hence the importance of drug trafficking in shaping Moscow's policy towards Afghanistan, the world's largest opiate producer. Russia's Federal Drug Control Service is actively involved in combating drug production in Afghanistan, *inter alia* through joint operations with Afghan counterparts. Such cooperation is part of wider multilateral efforts. Although these also involve the American Drug Enforcement Administration, Russia has severely criticised the US for its lack of commitment to eradicate poppy plantations.

Another threat highlighted by Moscow, though only a potential one, is the possible spillover of violence from Afghanistan to Central Asia. According to top Russian officials – e.g. Secretary-General of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) Nikolay Bordyuzha or Special Presidential Representative to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov – the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan could create opportunities for radical Islamic organisations currently active

there (such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) to attempt incursions into Central Asia after 2014, thus destabilising the region and threatening Russian interests.

Apart from these threats, the ongoing conflict situation in Afghanistan has also presented economic opportunities for Moscow. Russia is part of NATO's supply chain – the Northern Distribution Network – and Russian air carriers are involved in other logistical endeavours (for example, NATO's Strategic Airlift Interim Solution), which allows Moscow to extract financial benefits from Western engagement in Afghanistan. Russian companies are also active in trade with Kabul – the annual trade turnover reached almost 1 billion USD in 2012. Besides exporting oil, petrol and weapons (although some arms deals were blocked by Washington, which was funding Kabul's acquisitions), Russian businesses are engaged in military equipment maintenance as well as subcontracting infrastructural projects.

Internal political developments in Afghanistan are not high on Russia's foreign policy agenda. Provided that the electoral process itself does not undermine the existing fragile stability, Moscow is not concerned about the outcome of the Afghan presidential election scheduled for April. Regardless of who might be in power in Kabul, the future Afghan administration is likely to pursue the current policy on Russia, which is mainly focused on enhancing bilateral economic ties. Similarly, Russia's view on reconciliation with the Taliban does not differ significantly from that of the Afghan government and ISAF. Consequently, Moscow supports any potential settlement with the Taliban on the condition that it be an internal Afghan decision based on a constitutional framework, and that the Taliban disarm, cut off all ties with and cease endorsement of international terrorism (i.e. not only al-Qaeda, but also Islamic insurgents in the Caucasus). It is also worth noting that, despite a difficult common history, Afghan elites mostly view Russia favourably, especially in regard to business cooperation.

Moscow's strategic dichotomy

Yet Russia's overall approach is still mainly determined by issues surrounding foreign military presence there rather than its bilateral relations with Kabul. Russia simultaneously calls for US withdrawal from the region and fears its consequences. This strategic schizophrenia can be explained by the fact that, while Russia does see US presence there through the Cold War lenses of geopolitical rivalry, it also acknowledges America's role in stabilising the region. Moscow does not seem to have decided which of these factors is more important – hence its lack of a coherent strategy.

Initially Russia was very supportive of US efforts in Afghanistan, separating this issue from others in its relations with Washington (for example Russia allowed the US to use of its airspace to transport troops and weapons to and from Kabul). Firstly, a stable Afghanistan lies in Russia's interest. Secondly, the US' heavy involvement there was viewed by Moscow as giving Russia more leverage in other theatres worldwide. From the very beginning, however, Russia also perceived US and NATO military presence in post-Soviet Central Asia – essential to the success of ISAF – as Western interference in its vicinity and has actively advocated for the termination of the US presence (which would severely limit ISAF capabilities).

A strategic dichotomy can also be observed in Moscow's contradictory stance on the withdrawal of the ISAF forces by late 2014 and the possible signature of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between Kabul and Washington (which would allow for US military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014). Russia fears the potential negative consequences of the ISAF withdrawal for Central Asia but welcomed the closure of the US Manas Transit Centre in Kyrgyzstan (scheduled for July 2014). In the same vein, while Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov calls on the international community and NATO not to abandon Afghanistan, as it may have grave repercussions for the region, presidential envoy Kabulov claims that the BSA would lead to a permanent US military presence in Afghanistan and expresses concerns over such prospect.

While Russian decision-makers often voice their fears of a deterioration in the security situation in Afghanistan, their legitimate concerns may be intentionally exaggerated in order to exploit the Afghan factor to secure Russia's interests elsewhere. At regional level, this would mean pushing the Central Asian states closer to Russia. CSTO Secretary-General Bordiuzha has appealed repeatedly for closer cooperation within the Russia-dominated alliance. As a part of this, Russia would like to see its border troops again manning Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan – an idea so far opposed by the authorities in Dushanbe.

On a wider scale, such actions may be aimed at further strengthening Russia's international position, for example through suggesting direct NATO-CSTO cooperation (so far NATO cooperates with CSTO member states directly and bilaterally, bypassing the organisation). Such cooperation on Afghanistan was proposed in 2010 by Russian envoy to NATO Dmitriy Rogozin and has since been repeatedly floated by other high-ranking Russian officials, including Bordiuzha and Lavrov.

Józef Lang is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW).

