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## Afghanistan after 2014: The Way Forward for Russia

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**Ekaterina Stepanova**

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# Contents

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<b>SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>RUSSIA'S AFGHANISTAN-RELATED CONCERNS IN CENTRAL ASIA.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Security considerations .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Risks of increasing instability in Central Asia.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>THE CHALLENGE OF THE AFGHAN OPIATES .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>The scale of threat.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Evolution of Russia's counternarcotics policy .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>The potential increase of Afghan drugs into Russia.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>17</b>

## Summary

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It may appear that Russia is equally dissatisfied with both Western security's presence in and its departure from Afghanistan planned for 2014, but whether the Western withdrawal is seen as more of a gain or a loss depends on how Moscow itself assesses and balances its own security concerns in the region: instability, extremism and narcotics. At the same time the spill-over of violence and extremism does not pose a direct threat to Russia itself for whom the main implications of U.S./NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan are in Central Asia. Moscow's main strategy to address potential cross-border repercussions for its Central Asian allies and the increase in Western back-up and transit-related presence in Central Asia is to intensify security and economic cooperation with Russia's CSTO partners in the region. This will be coupled with keeping a certain distance from Afghanistan, despite the large scale challenge posed by the inflow of Afghan heroin—the most direct Afghanistan-related security concern for Russia. Regarding drug control and counternarcotics in particular, Russia will have to rely on whatever government will be in place in Afghanistan. This explains Moscow's genuine interest in increasing functionality and legitimacy of the Afghan state, which can only be achieved through an intra-Afghan political process and power-sharing arrangement.

## Introduction

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For Russia, implications of developments in and around Afghanistan—during more than a decade of Western security involvement and with an eye on U.S./NATO withdrawal—go beyond comparisons with Soviet counterinsurgency, state-building and development experience there in the 1980s and with the 1989 withdrawal of the Soviet forces.

While Russia is one of several players in the broader region, there is no shortage of actors even more directly affected by the situation in Afghanistan. These range from such critical players as Pakistan and Iran to the two larger neighbors—China and India—and the Central Asian states. Compared to these regional actors, Russia's overall role on Afghanistan is modest. In some respects, such as its influence on intra-Afghan political process or donor and development activity, Russia is much less relevant than some other “out-of-area” states adjacent to the region such as the UAE or Turkey. At the same time, Russia does have certain Afghanistan-related concerns, interests and a more tangible role to play in at least three respects. Russia is the single largest end-market for the Afghan heroin, a major facilitator of U.S./NATO Afghanistan-related transit and a large and still relatively powerful player in Central Asia and ally of several of Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors.

Like most other regional and next-to-the-region actors, Russia has been rather ambiguous in its reaction regarding the U.S. and NATO military presence in Afghanistan over the past decade. Initially Moscow officially welcomed the post-9/11 “war on terrorism” and the U.S.-led multilateral intervention in Afghanistan. Partly due to Russia's concerns about the volatile situation to the south of the former Soviet borders and to perceived external terrorist threats from Islamist extremists, this was also an attempt to link its own security campaign in Chechnya to “global war on terrorism” and try to legitimize it as part of broader international antiterrorism agenda. This, however, did not prevent Moscow from always suspecting a degree of “power projection in disguise” in the U.S./NATO gradually expanding presence in Afghanistan and from seeing it as partly and perhaps, ultimately, intended to keep Russia (and China) “in check” in Central Asia.

Russia's reaction to the U.S./NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan appears equally, if not more, ambiguous.

On the one hand, perhaps nothing illustrates the limits of perceived U.S. “omnipotence” better than the inglorious but explicable end of the U.S./NATO Afghanistan campaign. The United States and NATO gradually got mired in an inconclusive, and fragmented, but

deadly, and intense asymmetrical war with an incomparably weaker, but indigenous and highly convicted Taliban insurgency. They also became engaged in another controversial state-building experiment, with questionable and mixed results at best. The U.S. and NATO presence brought neither security, nor peace to Afghanistan. Nor was it particularly relevant to dealing with the rapidly expanding opium economy, whose output quickly became the most direct challenge emanating for Russia from Afghanistan.

The U.S.-led withdrawal from Afghanistan only confirmed and fed into Russia's complaints about inefficiency of Western security presence there. The choice for an "exit option" amounted, at least in the eyes of Russia and other regional players, to the U.S. and NATO reluctant recognition of counterinsurgency impasse and a general lack of progress, if not outright failure, in Afghanistan. Once the seriousness of the Obama administration's intent to take an exit course was established (which took Russian experts and policy-makers some time), Moscow's geostrategically-minded rulers must have sensed, if not voiced, some relief regarding U.S. longer-term geopolitical ambitions in the region. This is not to mention a more down-to-earth "bonus" for Russia to earn some money in the form of U.S. and its allies' payment for Afghanistan-related transit facilitation.

On the other hand, Russia is far from "dancing on the bones" and rejoicing at the U.S. hasty departure—and certainly did not expect it to be so speedy and decisive. The wrap-up of U.S. military presence takes place as Afghanistan remains an area of armed conflict and continuing instability. Given the limited functionality and questionable legitimacy of the Afghan state, rampant corruption and absence of political settlement, the transfer of security tasks present Afghan authorities allows an even larger security vacuum to be created, with serious repercussions in terms of cross-border instability, militancy, and shadow economy. This naturally worries all regional stake-holders, none of whom (and Russia least of all) is ready or can afford to play direct security role in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the U.S./NATO departure requires temporary upgrade of Western security presence and expansion of logistical networks to Central Asia and has revived U.S. interest in security cooperation with states of the region, especially with the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan. This, in turn, fueled Russia's suspicions about the underlying motivations behind heavier Western security footprint in Central Asia.

All this raises a number of questions. Overall, are there more losses or gains for Russia resulting from the earlier and more radical U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan? To what extent is Russia's own national and human security is affected by the situation in Afghanistan and if and how that can change after 2014? Does the end of the NATO ISAF mission and U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan really change much for Russia vis-à-vis Afghanistan? How much distance from Afghanistan should Russia keep—and what type of activity or engagement can it afford—in the post-2014 context? To what extent do developments in and around Afghanistan affect Russia's policy in Central Asia? This brief will try to address some of these concerns.



# Russia's Afghanistan-related Concerns in Central Asia

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## *Security considerations*

While security considerations take priority in Russia's approach to the Afghanistan problem, Russia, compared to all other external actors, is perhaps the most severely constrained in its security policy towards Afghanistan.

The troubled Soviet past in Afghanistan and Russia's reduced military, political and economic potential and limited regional outreach beyond the former Soviet space decisively preclude any direct security role in Afghanistan, before or after 2014. Russia's own impact on security in Afghanistan has been and will remain limited and indirect. During the U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan, Russia had been providing some direct military assistance, such as training Afghan officers and supplying arms and equipment to the Afghan army and foreign forces. This ranged from donating small arms to the Afghan Army to a U.S.-Russia helicopter package deal<sup>1</sup>. This has been coupled with pragmatic, "no love lost" cooperation with the United States and NATO on facilitating their Afghanistan-related transit via Central Asia. Russia also has a limited, but potentially growing role to play in economic cooperation and assistance to Afghanistan (so far, mostly confined to subcontracting in the field of reconstruction and several projects in energy and transport infrastructure sectors).

Russia's instinctive and rational inclination to "keep a distance" from Afghanistan as such does not mean that Moscow's security concerns about the broader region have not grown, in expectation of the looming Western withdrawal in 2014.

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<sup>1</sup> The first ever contract signed by the Russian government defense export agency directly with the Pentagon.

## ***Risks of increasing instability in Central Asia***

Indeed, for Russia, the main security implications of the U.S./NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan do not appear to be in Afghanistan—they are in Central Asia. Three points need to be considered in this respect.

First, over the past decade, Russia's assessment of the terrorism threat emanating from Afghanistan has evolved. Russia's understanding of "terrorism" as a threat posed by Afghanistan/Pakistan-based actors has shifted—from the emphasis on al-Qaeda's global connection, including links to the North Caucasus, in the first post-9/11 years to a regional focus centered on implications for Central Asia. Russia's earlier inclination to mimic U.S.-style obsession with al-Qaeda terrorism was largely dictated by a practical need to link Russia's own decade-long security campaign in Chechnya to the U.S.-led global "war on terrorism" and to stress the "common" nature of the "global" threat. The international context, however, started to change soon. The U.S. and allied/NATO forces became hopelessly mired in Afghanistan and the Taliban-led insurgency escalated. The broader U.S.-led "war on terrorism" has ultimately emerged as a highly controversial and, to an extent, even counterproductive campaign. According to the best available statistics (integrated in Global Terrorism Index), over a decade since the "war on terrorism" was launched in 2001, terrorist activity increased by 234 percent, and a lion's share and the sharpest rise of this activity was accounted for by two countries that became the primary targets in the "war on terrorism"—Iraq since 2004 and Afghanistan later in the 2000s (joined by Pakistan by the early 2010s).<sup>2</sup>

In the meantime, Russia managed to scale down a major war in Chechnya to a fragmented minor conflict of lower intensity in the North Caucasian region, albeit by paying a heavy political, security and economic price for "Chechenization". In this context, Moscow increasingly realized the need to reach out to moderate Islamic forces and Muslim states and the inadequacy of the "Islamist terrorism"-centered course in its policies in the broader Middle East/Southwest Asia. This also led Russia to narrow down the "terrorism threat" from Afghanistan (and Pakistan) and to link it primarily to the more localized threat of a spill-over of terrorism and militancy, mainly by exiled Central Asian militants, to Central Asian states. A parallel sharp increase was an extremely large scale and rapid "securitization" of a direct threat posed to Russia itself by the trafficking of the Afghan heroin started to gain growing attention in Moscow and required some policy shift, partly at the expense of the former "terrorism-first" approach.

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<sup>2</sup> *Global Terrorism Index: Capturing the Impact of Terrorism in 2002-2011*, Sydney/New York, Institute for Economics and Peace, 2012, pp. 4, 23.  
<[www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/2012-Global-Terrorism-Index-Report.pdf](http://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/2012-Global-Terrorism-Index-Report.pdf)>.

Second, even as the threat of a spill-over of militancy and terrorism from Afghanistan is an issue for Moscow, especially in view of its concerns about stability in Central Asia and its security relations with several Central Asian regimes, overestimating “the spill-over threat” may be as short-sighted as underestimating it. Indeed, there has been some rise in violent incidents in northern Afghanistan since 2009. However, these developments do not justify blaming elements of unrest and militancy in the neighboring Central Asian states, particularly in Tajikistan in 2010-2012, primarily on a spill-over of internal conflict and instability from Afghanistan. To start with, spill-over of instability goes in both directions (not only from Afghanistan to Central Asia, but also, e. g., from Tajikistan to Afghanistan).<sup>3</sup> The main sources of instability and organized violence in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan are internal and do not result from spill-over from Afghanistan, even if the political need for “foreign scapegoats” remains very high for all governments in the region. Similarly, not all instability in northern Afghanistan can be blamed on the “old” exiled militants from Central Asia, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU had been forced to relocate to Afghanistan in the late 1990s, suffered a major crackdown there in 2001, fled to Pakistan’s tribal areas and became increasingly marginalized by the mid-2000s.<sup>4</sup>

It seems easier for everyone (from NATO to the Afghan government) to blame the new violence in northern Afghanistan on the familiar old ghost of the IMU than to recognize a harsher reality—the emergence of new anti-government elements in north, both local and new exiles from Tajikistan, and—a particular embarrassment for NATO and local strongmen—even some spread of elements of the Taliban insurgency to northern Afghanistan where they previously could hardly get ground or local support. Finally, it would be short-sighted for Russia to ignore a degree of manipulation of the scale of “spill-over” threat that appears to be “instrumentalized” by various actors, including the United States and its NATO allies in their reach-out to Central Asian regimes, especially Uzbekistan, in pursuit of their Afghanistan-related transit / back-up needs, and vice versa, by Central Asian governments, as a means to raise their “strategic importance” in relation to Afghanistan in the eyes of the U.S., NATO, Russia and regional powers.

Third, Russia’s post-2014 Afghanistan-related strategic concerns are not only about spill-over of violence and instability from

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<sup>3</sup> Much of the peripheral violence in Tajikistan in 2010-2012 was linked to government operations to crack-down on the remnants of the former United Islamic Opposition—a crack-down that may put the 1997 Tajik Peace Agreement at risk. International Crisis Group, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, Asia Report, Bishkek /Brussels: ICG, No. 205, 2011, <[www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/205-tajikistan-the-changing-insurgent-threats.aspx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/205-tajikistan-the-changing-insurgent-threats.aspx)>; Tadjnakhsh S. *Turf on the Roof of the World*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center (NOREF) Report, September 2012, <[www.peacebuilding.no/Regions/Asia/Central-Asia/Turf-on-the-roof-of-the-world](http://www.peacebuilding.no/Regions/Asia/Central-Asia/Turf-on-the-roof-of-the-world)>.

<sup>4</sup> See E. Stepanova, “Islamist terrorism in the Caucasus and Central Asia,” in A. Schmid and G. Hindle (eds), *After the War on Terror: Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counterterrorism Strategy*, London: RUSI, 2009, p. 112–121, <[www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/After\\_The\\_War\\_On\\_Terror.pdf](http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/After_The_War_On_Terror.pdf)>.

Afghanistan to Central Asia, but also about the U.S. interest in expanding security presence in Central Asia. The U.S. main interest in expanding security presence in the region may be self-evident—to ensure safe transit/logistics corridor and to back up its remaining forces in Afghanistan. However, it was bound to cause new suspicion and distrust on the Russian side about the U.S. “underlying” goals and motivation in the region, especially in view of the U.S.-Uzbekistan rapprochement and Tashkent’s withdrawal from Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in June 2012. In fact, it is this newly stimulated interest on the part of the United States that might have helped to spur Russia’s own activity in Central Asia. President Putin’s visits to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the fall of 2012 give a clue on the path that this activity would take: a combination of economic agreements (especially in energy sector, such as hydropower stations construction) and military/security arrangements (such as finalizing comprehensive agreements on bases/military facilities and offering new military assistance).

Overall, Moscow’s main strategy to address security concerns in Central Asia in the context of U.S./NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan is to intensify security and economic cooperation with Russia’s CSTO partners in the region. Paradoxically, this process has been catalyzed both by the prospect of U.S./NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and by the related, even if temporary, increase in Western security interest and activity in Central Asia. Russia’s upgraded emphasis on Central Asia will be coupled with keeping a certain distance from Afghanistan—a distance large enough to exclude any direct security role for Russia, but limited enough to allow some economic role and security assistance to whichever government and political coalition are in power in Afghanistan after 2014.

# The Challenge of the Afghan Opiates

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The main concern that drives Russia's genuine interest in improved general security in Afghanistan is Moscow's major counter-narcotics concern related to the large-scale inflow of opiates, primarily heroin, of the Afghan origin. The narcotics problem is the most direct security challenge from Afghanistan to Russia itself.

## *The scale of threat*

It is a delusion to think that the U.S./NATO withdrawal will have catastrophic consequences for Russia in the form of a radical rise in narco-trafficking from Afghanistan—not because there is no catastrophe, but because the “creeping” catastrophe has already taken place. During the 2000s Russia became the single largest country end-market for the Afghan heroin. This coincided with—and partly results from—an unprecedented increase in post-Taliban Afghanistan's opiate output over the past decade, particularly since 2004. Poppy cultivation reached its historical peak in 2007, with the area under cultivation 25 times larger than that in 2001—the last year of the Taliban rule which, in contrast, had seen unprecedented decline in poppy crops (by 91 percent!), as a result of the highly effective Taliban opium ban.<sup>5</sup>

In the 2000s, three main factors contributed to the expansion of opium economy in Afghanistan: 1) lack of sustainable economic alternatives for cash-based income in poppy-growing areas; 2) weakness and lack of functionality of the Karzai government; and 3) escalating armed conflict. However, as Afghanistan's heroin output increased most sharply during the U.S./NATO presence and as Russia faced a combination of its “heroin catastrophe” with a conspicuous lack of Western interest in reducing the size of the Afghan opium economy, a widespread perception in Russia that the surge in opium production in post-Taliban Afghanistan occurred due to U.S./NATO presence is probably understandable, even if inaccurate.

The basic reality is that the Afghan narco-trafficking does not pose a major or direct threat to all stakeholders in Afghanistan. The

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<sup>5</sup> In 2007, Afghanistan had 193 000 ha under poppy crops, compared to just 8000 ha in 2001. *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008*, Vienna, UNODC, 2008, p. 7.

size of threat is quite different even for Russia and Europe: Russia's narcotics market is overwhelmed by Afghan heroin, whereas in the more diversified European markets opiate consumption has stabilized and gives way to growing inflows of cocaine from South/Central America, including via West Africa, as a more pressing threat. The United States is not directly threatened by Afghan opiates that account for no more than 3-6 percent of its heroin market.<sup>6</sup> Washington's main concerns in Afghanistan have been terrorism and insurgency, with illicit drugs as a strictly secondary issue, relevant mainly in the context of insurgency funding.

In contrast, for Russia, the inflow of the Afghan heroin became the largest challenge from Afghanistan, posing a vital threat to its human security and outweighing, by its direct impact on the Russian society, other Afghanistan-related concerns. While present trafficking through the "Northern route" via Central Asia accounts for 25 percent of Afghanistan's heroin exports (90 mt) and 15 percent of opium exports (35–40 mt), 90 percent of heroin that goes via Central Asia ends up in Russia (75–80 tons/year).<sup>7</sup> For Russia, of critical importance is not the mere volume, but the changed structure and ultimate destination of the Northern flow: while in the 1990s Russia was emerging as both consumer and transit state for the Afghan opiates, in the 2000s, it switched to absorbing all incoming heroin, consuming almost as much as all of Europe does.<sup>8</sup>

Critical to explaining this transformation was the relatively cheap price for Afghan heroin in the Russian market—due to overproduction inside Afghanistan, lack of properly guarded borders across the Northern route, and, ironically, the rising economic situation in Russia itself for much of the 2000s which made heroin affordable to larger segments of the population. Afghan heroin accounts for 68 percent of active drug abusers in Russia (or 1,7 mln of 2,5 mln people)<sup>9</sup> and leads with a large margin among hard narcotics (with a market worth 6 bln USD), followed by hashish (1,5 bln USD), which is also mostly of the Afghan origin.<sup>10</sup>

## ***Evolution of Russia's counternarcotics policy***

A strong priority of security/counterinsurgency tasks for the U.S. and NATO in Afghanistan, as well as the lack of direct threat from the

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<sup>6</sup> *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2011*, New York, United Nations, 2012; interview with DEA experts, November 2012.

<sup>7</sup> *World Drug Report 2011*, New York, UNODC, 2011, p. 71; *The Global Afghan Opiate Trade: A Threat Assessment*, Vienna, UNODC, 2011, p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> *World Drug Report 2011*, p. 72–73.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Vol. 1: Drug and Chemical Control*, Washington D.C.: Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 2012, p. 376.

<sup>10</sup> V. Ivanov, Director of the Federal Service for Control of Narcotics Circulation (FSKN), quoted by INTERFAX news agency, 23 March 2012.



Afghan opiates to the United States and a lower degree of such threat for most NATO/EU members, compared to Russia, explain why the West has not emphasized counternarcotics in Afghanistan. It also explains why Washington started to pay some attention to the problem since the late 2000s, emphasizing different aspects of counternarcotics than Russia did<sup>11</sup>.

From the U.S. point of view, backing massive eradication in Afghanistan was technically unfeasible and politically counterproductive, raising the risk of social protest and alienating peasants in drug-producing areas. Large-scale interdiction could also alienate friendly or neutral warlords and government-linked interests and clans who profit from illicit drugs no less than peasants, traffickers or insurgents do. Hence, in contrast to U.S. reliance on aerial eradication in countries like Colombia, in Afghanistan the Obama administration promoted a combination of alternative development and select interdiction efforts to be only targeted against insurgency-linked groups.<sup>12</sup>

Russian officials have advocated more radical counternarcotics measures for Afghanistan, calling for large-scale eradication, robust interdiction and drug laboratory destruction by the Afghan government and its security backers. Gradually, as the Russian government realized the gravity of narcotics challenge and upgraded it to one of the top security challenges and as Russia's relatively young counternarcotics agency FSKN familiarized itself with the specifics and sources of the Afghan drug threat, Moscow's policy has evolved to go beyond "eradication first" mantra. Along with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Russia (which in contrast to its Western counterparts was not constrained by any direct security/counterinsurgency risks in Afghanistan), was quicker to recognize the drug business links to all types of Afghan political-military actor, including corrupt officials and warlords linked to the government, not just insurgency. In 2011, Russia's counternarcotics chief was the first foreign government representative to question attempts to solely link drugs in Afghanistan to insurgency/terrorism. According to the UNODC and other estimates, the insurgents' annual revenues from taxing cultivation and some of opium trade in areas under their control does not exceed 140-170 mln USD.<sup>13</sup> This accounts for no more than 6,5 percent of the total net value of the Afghan drug economy (that stood at 2,6 bln USD in 2011).<sup>14</sup> Russia's FSKN also estimated the Taliban's annual drug income at 150 mln USD and even pointed at the insurgency's role in the drug business as that of a

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<sup>11</sup> Despite otherwise a degree of proximity in both countries' "securitized" and supply-oriented counternarcotics strategies.

<sup>12</sup> T. Shanker and E. Bumiller, "U.S. Shifts Afghan Narcotics Strategy," *New York Times*, 23 July 2009.

<sup>13</sup> *The Global Afghan Opiate Trade: A Threat Assessment*, op. cit. [7], pp. 22, 30. See also E. Stepanova, "Illicit drugs and insurgency in Afghanistan," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. VI, No. 2, May 2012, p. 4–18, <[www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/articles/issues/PTv6i2.pdf](http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/articles/issues/PTv6i2.pdf)>.

<sup>14</sup> *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2011*, Vienna, UNODC, 2011, p. 77.

“minority beneficiary”.<sup>15</sup> Lately, Russia has started to advocate a more comprehensive drug control and counternarcotics strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, promoting a combination of enforcement solutions with a longer-term development strategy beyond crop substitution, to create stable sources of income on a national scale as a socio-economic alternative to the opium economy.<sup>16</sup>

While Moscow has to counter the heroin problem inside Russia and along the trafficking route, no sustainable progress can be achieved until the problem is systematically addressed at the source—Afghanistan. As Russia itself cannot afford direct security involvement in Afghanistan, it has to depend on whatever national or multilateral security capacity is present there for counternarcotics (i.e., primarily on the Afghan government after 2014, whoever that will be). Still, the United States is likely to remain, on a bilateral basis, the main extra-regional security actor vis-à-vis Afghanistan even after 2014. Also, while the U.S. has less of an incentive to combat the opiate threat than Russia does, it is interested in Russia’s cooperation on Afghanistan-related transit.

This dictates Russia’s strong preference for a certain regional “division of labor” on countering Afghan narcotrafficking. While the prospect of the departure of U.S./NATO forces makes Russia’s calls for their more active enforcement role in counternarcotics largely irrelevant, Moscow would still want the United States to continue and even expand direct U.S. counternarcotics support and development assistance to Afghanistan. In a way, Moscow even expects this from the United States and its NATO allies—and perhaps has every right to do so—as a certain “compensation” for the dramatic impact that the Afghan heroin inflow has had on Russia’s security during the 2000s and for potential repercussions of the West’s speeded withdrawal from Afghanistan, in the absence of stability or political settlement. Russia, in turn, could and should concentrate more on the Central Asian trafficking route (by both increasing counternarcotics support to its Central Asian partners and promoting greater regional cooperation on this issue), as well as on its own domestic enforcement and demand reduction measures.

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<sup>15</sup> Viktor Ivanov quoted in “Russia Criticizes NATO for Afghan Heroin,” BBC Russian Service, 27 February 2010, <[www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2010/02/100227\\_ivanov\\_afghan\\_heroin.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2010/02/100227_ivanov_afghan_heroin.shtml)>; in “White Death across Russia,” Voice of Russia, 22 November 2011, <<http://fskn.gov.ru/includes/periodics/review/2011/1123/060015956/detail.shtml>>.

<sup>16</sup> This point was underscored by President Putin in September 2012, when he remarked, when discussing Afghanistan after U.S and NATO departure, that “Nine percent of that country’s GDP comes from drug trafficking. If you want to replace this 9 percent, you’ll have to pay—but no one wants to... Talk is not enough—what you need is substantive economic policies and financial assistance. Nobody seems willing to provide that, to begin with.” Vladimir Putin’s interview to Russia Today, 6 September 2012, <<http://rt.com/news/vladimir-putin-exclusive-interview-481/>>.



## ***The potential increase of Afghan drugs into Russia***

In the coming years the threat of Afghan opiates may further threaten neighboring states and main end-markets (Russia, China and, to some extent, Europe). For Russia the inflow of Afghan opiates via the Northern route is likely to increase for several new factors, only two of which are related to Afghanistan and only one—to the U.S./NATO departure.

This significant new risk manifests itself in the south which is central to the Afghan opium economy. When the international security presence ends in its present form in 2014, the Afghan government's fragile control in the main poppy-growing provinces in the south will further weaken, while the Taliban presence will expand. This will inevitably result in the scaling-down of a large portion of foreign crop substitution and alternative development assistance. This decline in agricultural assistance, in the absence of cash-generating non-farm economic alternatives, will lead to diversion of much of the recently expanded arable and irrigated land to poppy cultivation.

Counterintuitively, as U.S./NATO forces depart from the south and as the insurgents consolidate their control there providing a basically functional and less corrupt order, the Taliban might even be expected—and perhaps induced to reproduce the success of their 2000 ban (as noted above, the Taliban is not the main beneficiary of drugs profits even within Afghanistan and had proved themselves capable to enforce a strict cultivation ban before). However, this expectation fades away for now, while the Taliban may well provide a degree of functional governance in the south, they will not be in a position, to afford confrontational measures against the peasants, including poppy-growers who will inevitably expand cultivation due to a lack of cash-based alternatives. This does not mean the issue is closed and stands no chances with the Taliban in the future—it could be part of their agenda to be re-opened later through intermediaries after the insurgency becomes part of some decentralized political power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan.

Heroin supply to the Northern route is a problem hardly confined to the war-torn south of Afghanistan. Another risk factor is the resumed opium cultivation in the north (a region with relatively low cultivation, but with sizeable heroin production and refinement). While half of Northern route heroin supply comes from southern Afghanistan, a remaining 45 tons have been produced annually in northern Afghanistan, mainly in the northeastern Badakhshan province<sup>17</sup> from locally cultivated opium and from opium stocks after that cultivation declined in the late 2000s. As these stocks dried up, the local labs

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<sup>17</sup> *Opiate Flows Through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Threat Assessment*, UNODC, 2012, pp. 10, 21 ff. <[www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghanistan\\_northern\\_route\\_2012\\_web.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghanistan_northern_route_2012_web.pdf)>.

demand had to be partly met by a new rise in cultivation that started in 2011-2012.<sup>18</sup> Opiate trade in northern Afghanistan is also facilitated by a disproportionately low level of heroin seizures (5 percent of all seizures country-wide), compared to the volume of heroin going through the Northern route.<sup>19</sup>

The risk factors in Afghanistan overlap with new risks along the trafficking route across Central Asia. Stable high heroin inflows to Russia via Northern route in recent years (the same 75-80 mt/year) are coupled with a significant decline in drug seizures in Central Asia (by 36 percent for opium and by 25 percent for heroin).<sup>20</sup> This suggests weakening counternarcotics capacity in Central Asian states and growing narcotics-related corruption across the region. In Central Asia, counternarcotics capacity now lags far behind traffickers' ability to actively exploit new economic developments and opportunities such as the expansion of trans-regional transport infrastructure, an increase in trade, and an expanded free-trade area as a result of Kazakhstan joining the Customs Union with Russia and Belarus.

For Russia, the best-case scenario implies a limited increase in opiate flows through the Northern route in the coming years, to stabilize at higher level than it stands at present. The worst-case scenario could involve reorientation of some part of the main opiate trafficking route to Europe from the traditional Balkan route to the northern one via Central Asia, turning Russia back to a transit state for Afghan heroin.

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<sup>18</sup> *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2012, Summary Findings*, Vienna, UNODC, 2012, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Opiate Flows through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia*, pp. 34, 37.

<sup>20</sup> The only exception is Uzbekistan where drug seizures have actually increased, partly due to somewhat better border control, as compared to neighboring states. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

## Conclusions

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It has been some time since the United States under the first administration of Barack Obama set its mind on the reduction of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. After that, Russia, among other regional players, voiced concerns about the post-2014 Afghanistan problem and by 2013, two new conditions emerged.

One questions the readiness of re-elected President Obama and his reshuffled foreign policy team to not only speed up troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, but also consider leaving as few forces there after 2014 as possible. This hastiness may seem to complicate the situation on the ground, by making the transition period tougher and shorter weathering rising security concerns across the region about potential destabilization. On the other hand, Washington's announcement of plans to withdraw practically all forces has at least one positive effect—it is a necessary condition to open way for ceasefire talks with the insurgency (whose leaders refused to engage in any substantive talks as long as U.S./NATO keep forces in Afghanistan), even if such talks are nothing but a prelude to genuine intra-Afghan peace process with the ultimate goal of achieving political settlement and power-sharing agreement.

Another new factor, unrelated to Afghanistan per se, is the latest freeze in relations between the U.S. and Russia (and to a lesser extent, between Russia and the West), since late 2012. This freeze has practically put an end to the relatively upbeat “reset” period in bilateral relations since 2009. While this deterioration in American-Russian relations could have been expected to impede cooperation on Afghanistan, it may have unexpectedly produced an opposite effect. By now the two countries realize that while bilateral relations will be quite tense in the coming years, they cannot be allowed to deteriorate below a certain level. Ironically, this may imply that the present political tensions may actually—and counter intuitively—push the parties to concentrate on cooperation on those select security issues that are of interest to both of them. In addition to the latest renewed emphasis on counterterrorism cooperation (in light of the April 15, 2013 Boston marathon attacks blamed on U.S.-based terrorist suspects of North Caucasian origin), mutual security interests include strategic arms control, tactical missile defense and Afghanistan. American-Russian security and political cooperation on Afghanistan is ongoing and may actually develop further—at least while the United States and its Western allies retain major interest in the region. And if these interests decline, so would the potential for cooperation.

Even as the NATO and U.S. military presence ends in its present form, nothing—even the large-scale direct challenge posed by the inflow of the Afghan opiates—can drag Russia into becoming a much larger player in Afghanistan than it presently is. While Moscow is likely to keep a certain distance from Afghanistan as such, the scale-down and the looming end of Western security presence in Afghanistan in its present form have already stimulated some upgrade and extension of Russia's security and economic outreach and presence in Central Asia.

It may appear that Russia is equally dissatisfied with both the U.S./NATO presence in and departure from Afghanistan. However, whether the Western withdrawal is seen as more of a gain or more loss depends on how Moscow itself assesses and balances its security concerns. Russia's two main security concerns about Afghanistan—terrorism and narcotics—should not be conflated, even as there is some overlap between the two. Depending on which threat is prioritized and on how realistically it is assessed, different policy accents may be required in Russia's approach to Afghanistan (affecting not only Russia's security policy, but also Moscow's approach to intra-Afghan political settlement and whether, on a balance, it sees U.S./NATO departure as more of a less welcome development).

If terrorism is prioritized and the threat of spill-over of instability to Central Asia is hyped beyond reason, then U.S./NATO departure from Afghanistan might be regretted. Attempts by Russian policymakers or analysts to excessively emphasize terrorism threats in connection to Afghanistan, in the absence of direct links between terrorist groups and activity in Afghanistan and Russia, could also reflect a more instrumental approach linked to Moscow's alliance-building and stability concerns in Central Asia. It may also imply a degree of manipulation of this "threat" to accommodate Central Asian regimes and bow to their obsession with the "export" and "spill-over" of Islamist terrorism and militancy from Afghanistan. The main risk of taking this approach is that it drags Russia back to counterproductive and controversial "war on terrorism" logic and may adversely affect other aspects of Russia's policy on Afghanistan, especially when it comes to counternarcotics and political settlement issues.

If the narcotics threat is stressed, then the policy priority is to end the armed conflict and promote an adequate power-sharing agreement as the main condition for ensuring minimal functionality and legitimacy of governance both in Kabul and in the south (without which no drug control and counternarcotics measures stand a chance). For Russia, this also implies that the end of U.S./NATO military presence as a necessary condition for the start of meaningful intra-Afghan political negotiations should actually be welcome, even as complete Western disengagement from Afghanistan, especially in terms of reconstruction and development assistance, is undesirable.

One way to balance these two aspects of Russia's security policy is to link them to different centers of gravity, i.e. to consider the threat

of spill-over of terrorism/instability primarily in how it affects Central Asia, while letting narcotics-related concern play a larger role in directing Russia's policy on Afghanistan as such. In fact, a degree of such balance may be emerging. There is also at least one lowest common denominator: Russia's genuine interest in improved security and governance capacity in Afghanistan. This imperative is critical to hedge both against cross-border spill-overs of militancy and instability to Central Asia and against the largest—and the only direct—threat for the Russian society from Afghanistan, posed by heroin trafficking.

For drug control and counternarcotics, Russia will have to rely on whatever governance will be in place in Afghanistan. Given the nationwide, cross-regional scale of the Afghan opium economy, Russia will need to promote a counternarcotics agenda on its own and/or through intermediaries, not only with Kabul's central government (regardless of the composition of future coalition arrangement), but also with whomever exercises a degree of governance and control in Afghanistan's main drug-producing areas in the south, as well as with the political forces in northern Afghanistan.

In areas where drug economy is compounded by a protracted armed conflict, there is no solution to the drug problem without a solution to the conflict. As long as the armed confrontation continues, it will impede any functional governance in areas affected by both drugs and conflict. And, in absence of functional governance, neither soft nor tough counternarcotics measures, nor a combination of law enforcement and development solutions will work. Without foreign security backing, the weak central government stands little chance to keep or establish control in the south. Instead, even minimally functional governance there requires a political solution at the national level and a power-sharing arrangement involving the core of the Taliban-led insurgency.

While negotiations with the insurgency have been unlikely with much of the foreign military presence still in place, they may stand a better chance as foreign forces depart.

Russia is not a decisive player on the intra-Afghan political/peace process, but that does not mean that there is nothing that Russia can do to indirectly facilitate this process. Russia's approach to a political settlement in Afghanistan has all chances to continue to evolve towards becoming less ideological and more pragmatic.

Russia should support any political solution for Afghanistan that could increase the functionality and legitimacy of the Afghan state. In practical terms, one thing Russia could consider is to push the former Northern Alliance parties (with whom it keeps contacts and may retain some leverage) towards accepting a national power-sharing arrangement involving elements of the Taliban insurgency and at the same time to offer additional, formal or informal, support to the Northerners to at least partly alleviate their genuine concerns about the future political and governance system.