



RUSSIA'S AFGHAN POLICY IN THE REGIONAL AND RUSSIA-WEST CONTEXTS

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May 2018

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ISBN: 978-2-36567-855-1

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How to quote this document:

Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia's Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Contexts", *Russie.NEI.Reports*, No. 23, May 2018.

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Abstract

This report seeks to explain the main trends in Russia's evolving Afghanistan policy, with the focus on its regionalization, diversification, and new emphasis on diplomacy that culminated in Moscow regional peace consultations. It argues that none of Russia's Afghanistan-related concerns can be alleviated as long as the armed conflict there continues in full force. This makes Moscow genuinely interested in stabilization. However, the mere combination of military pressure against the Taliban and Western support of the Afghan government cannot achieve stabilization. As Russia remains severely constrained on any hard-security track and has limited leverage inside Afghanistan, there is little it can do apart from pushing for a regionally inclusive political process and supporting, within its capacity, anti-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) efforts at national, regional and international levels. Both tasks require access to all major regional players, including even limited communication channels with the Taliban. The report explores the effects of the evolving US/NATO factor on Russia's policy and Moscow's reaction to the revised US policy on Afghanistan under President Trump. Finally, it looks at how Afghanistan features in the rarely addressed Russia-Europe/EU context and whether there is any potential for cooperation or parallel efforts with similar or compatible goals.

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Introduction

Russia's policy on Afghanistan and the broader region has evolved significantly in the 2010s. This evolution has primarily been reactive to increasingly important regional dynamics, especially the growing role of regional powers as stakeholders on Afghanistan and, since the mid-2010s, the new ISIS factor. While less Western-centric than in the previous decade, Russia's policy has also been partly prompted by the evolution of that of the main extra-regional actor in Afghanistan—the United States (and, by extension, NATO). Much like regional powers, Russia has also been adapting its approach to fluctuations in the degree of the US/NATO interest and presence, ranging from drastic decline in the US military role in the mid-2010s under the Obama administration to limited security reengagement and new complications and opportunities offered by the Trump administration's Afghan policy revision.

The regional environment in the area at the intersection of South and Central Asia has changed in recent years—and continues to evolve. The key changes include:

- The growing role of regional powers, especially Afghanistan's four key neighbors—Pakistan, Iran, China and India—hereafter referred to as “the Big Four”. In recent years, the role of these powers, both in Afghanistan *per se* and in regional matters, has increased *in all respects*, ranging from geo-economics to peace and conflict issues. In some domains, this role has already become a dominant one (e. g., the one played by China and India in the political economy of the region).
- Relative, but long-term decline in Western interest and presence in the region. An increase in US troop levels in Afghanistan in 2017, under President Trump's new Afghan strategy, may only make the decline in the Western role less linear, but it is unlikely to radically change the overall trend in the long run.
- The ISIS factor in Afghanistan has drawn much international attention, but also led to a certain reassessment, at the regional level, of the role of the Taliban as an armed opponent of ISIS (allowing the Taliban to capitalize on being seen as a more indigenous, Afghan-centered force and a lesser threat than ISIS—if not for the Afghan government then at least for the broader region beyond Afghanistan).

Compared to the Big Four powers, Russia has been an indirect and less central actor on Afghanistan. Before and in the run-up to the withdrawal of the bulk of US/NATO forces in 2014, Russia had already started to shift its focus on Afghanistan from a US/Western-centered perspective to re-energizing and prioritizing contacts with key regional powers. The Trump administration's decision to increase US troop levels in Afghanistan will hardly change Russia's mainstream course in terms of "regionalizing" its Afghan policy. In fact, it may even push Russia further along this track, depending in part on the dynamics of Russia's overall relations with the United States and the West, which have deteriorated sharply since the 2014 crisis in Ukraine to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

While regionalization of Russia's policy on Afghanistan is a trend of the 2010s, its three other main features have endured throughout the early 21st century. First, for Russia, Afghanistan is not so much an issue of interest *per se*, but mainly an important part of a larger, complex regional setting. Second, the main focus of Russia's regional policy is on Central Asia, not Afghanistan. Third, Russia's main interest in Afghanistan and surrounding region is not geo-economics. Russian investment even in the economic development of Central Asia is relatively limited.¹ Moscow's revived interest in the region's main energy projects—TAPI and CASA-1000²—remains more prospect than reality, while a project to build an offshore gas pipeline connecting Iran, Pakistan and India is still at the early stage.³ Russia's main concerns about Afghanistan are security-related, and driven by a combination of genuine security interest and geopolitics.

Since the mid-2000s, the new element in Russia's policy on Afghanistan has been a certain shift beyond merely reactive patterns to becoming (a) more flexible and diversified towards the main "veto players" in Afghanistan and in the region and (b) more proactive on the diplomatic

1. In 2008-2017, Russia allocated over 6 bln USD in aid to Central Asian states, both bilaterally and through international organizations, while Russian investments in the region stand at 20 bln USD. See "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks at the UN Security Council Session on 'Formation of Regional Partnerships in Afghanistan and Central Asia as a Model of Coordinating Security and Development'", New York, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 19 January 2018, www.mid.ru.

2. TAPI is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline project to deliver natural gas from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan onwards to Pakistan and India (the project dates back to 1995, while the actual construction started in December 2015). CASA-1000 is an electricity transmission system to connect the hydropower-rich countries of Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have a surplus of electricity) with Afghanistan and Pakistan.

3. The project was frozen in 2013 due to sanctions against Iran, but planning restarted in 2017. In March 2018, the Russian Ministry of Energy and Iranian Oil Ministry working group on the project to build a 1200-km pipeline worth 5.7 bln USD met for the first time.

front, and launching its own track of regional peace consultations on Afghanistan.

While Russia already had solid relations, and engaged in regular consultations on Afghanistan, with China, Iran and India, the new development has been a relative rapprochement with Pakistan (which Russia tries to calibrate in order not to shake the balance of its relations with major regional powers, including India).⁴ On the intra-Afghan scene, Russia's approach had already shifted throughout the 2000s from supporting several factions linked to the Northern Alliance to prioritizing the national level and diversifying contacts to extend to all key Afghan communities, including the Afghan Pashtuns. More recently, following the advance of the Islamic State Afghan branch, Moscow even established limited communication channels with the Taliban movement. In the West—and among certain political forces inside Afghanistan—these new elements in Russia's approach raised a lot of suspicion and speculation.

This report seeks to explain the main trends and patterns of change and continuity in Russia's evolving Afghanistan policy, with the focus on its regionalization and diversification, and Moscow's newly acquired interest in diplomatic initiatives and mediation. It also addresses Russia's key concerns about the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for the broader region, especially for Central Asia where Russia retains sizeable security interest and presence. Finally, it explores the extent to which Russia's policy has been affected by fluctuations in the US/NATO presence in Afghanistan after 2014. The paper also looks at how Afghanistan features in the rarely addressed Russia-Europe/EU context and whether there is any congruence of interest and potential for cooperation, or at least for parallel efforts in relation to compatible goals.

4. In 2014-2017, the Russian military participated in (separate) joint antiterrorist exercises with India and Pakistan, both in Russia and in India and Pakistan. Russia lobbied for the simultaneous accession of India and Pakistan to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on 9 June 2017 and both are invited to take part in SCO antiterrorist exercise "Peace mission-2018" in Russia in September 2018.

Russia's diplomatic activity: The Moscow format and beyond

The most evident manifestation of further regionalization of Russia's policy has been its move from a relatively hands-off approach to the Afghan problem to a surge in diplomatic activity. Since December 2016, Russia sponsored the Moscow format of regional consultations—its first peace and security initiative and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' first significant diplomatic undertaking on Afghanistan in years. It was supplemented by some other diplomatic initiatives, such as revival of the Contact Group on Afghanistan (that had been inactive since 2009) at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These diplomatic efforts should also be placed in the broader context of Russia's (re)orientation towards Eurasia and Asia and support for macro-regional multilateralism.

The first round of Moscow consultations, involving Russia, China and Pakistan, took place on 27 December 2016. While it was the third tripartite meeting on Afghanistan, it was the first to become part of the broader regional process. The parties identified “the Afghan wing of ISIS” as the main threat in Afghanistan and called for an Afghan-led national reconciliation process. More specifically, the joint statement suggested that Russia and China, as permanent United Nations (UN) Security Council members, take a “flexible approach to exempting certain persons from sanctions lists in the efforts to establish a peaceful dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban” and welcomed Afghanistan's official participation in the next rounds of consultations.⁵

The second round was held on 15 February 2017, a week after the meeting between Russian and Afghan foreign ministers, Sergei Lavrov and Salahuddin Rabbani, and expanded into six-party consultations, now also involving Afghanistan as well as Iran and India. Notably, for the first time

5. “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, December 27, 2016”: see “Trilateral consultations on Afghanistan held in Moscow”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 27 December 2016, www.mid.ru. The first round provoked nervous reaction from the Afghan MFA who objected to the absence of the Afghan representatives, but was rather positively taken by the Taliban, if judged by a statement by their Doha office's spokesman Sahil Shakhin.

ever, regional peace consultations on Afghanistan had both Pakistan and India sitting at the same table.

The third round, held on 14 April 2017, while still formally referred to as “consultations”, was upgraded to the “Moscow conference on the Afghan settlement”. At the time, it was the broadest regional meeting on Afghanistan ever held, involving Russia plus 10 countries of the region (Afghanistan, its “Big Four” neighbors and all five Central Asian states). The United States was formally invited to participate (including during Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s first visit to Moscow on 11-12 April), but did not do so. The US absence could have had a simple technical explanation: Trump’s strategy on Afghanistan was still being formulated, and the Moscow conference came too soon after Tillerson’s visit to Russia, when both sides were focusing on more urgent bilateral issues. However, the absence at the 14 April round of even US Ambassador to Russia John Tefft (who frequently attended less important gatherings in Moscow) might have indicated that Washington was not ready to accept on principle, including under Trump, any Russia-initiated format on Afghanistan. Also, against the background of the Pentagon’s demonstrative use of its largest conventional bomb in eastern Afghanistan just a day before, the US decision to ignore the main regional peace consultations at the time was an early indication of the Trump administration’s shift of focus on Afghanistan towards a tougher and more militarized approach (compared to the last years of the Obama administration), de-emphasizing, for the time being, diplomacy and negotiated solutions. In the absence of its main foreign sponsor at the Moscow conference, the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) lowered the level of its representation from deputy foreign minister to head of directorate on policy and strategy. While the Taliban expressed readiness to go to Moscow for the April consultations if invited, they were not (and had they been, the maximum they could hope for would have been informal consultations with the Afghan officials on the margins of the formal conference).

The Moscow format should be seen in the broader context of other ongoing or new mediating initiatives that filled the void in multilateral negotiations since the temporary halt of the 2015-2016 Quadrilateral Group format with the participation of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and the USA, and used the time window offered by transition from one US administration to another. While the Moscow format was the most conspicuous development on the international diplomacy track on Afghanistan at the time, it aimed to complement or alternate with, rather than replace or contradict, other initiatives.

A planned follow-up round to the Moscow consultations took place on 6 June 2017, a Kabul conference with the participation of 30 countries, but it was overwhelmed by a series of deadly terrorist attacks in the capital, mass anti-government protests and a major political crisis.⁶ Following the Kabul conference, it was Chairman Xi Jinping, not President Vladimir Putin, who met with President Ghani on 8 June at the margins of the SCO summit in Astana.⁷ Beijing picked up the lead in the process and revived the Afghanistan-Pakistan-China dialogue through shuttle diplomacy. Pakistan also wanted the Quadrilateral Group revived.⁸ Of the Western actors, the UK mediated between Afghanistan and Pakistan on the border tensions in the spring of 2017.

While at the time the Quadrilateral Group format moved the furthest in trying to arrange for more direct mediation between the Afghan parties, the Moscow format also justified itself. The main substantive advance was that, for the first time, it produced a regional consensus—shared by 11 states of the broader region, including all five Central Asian states—recognizing the need to engage the Taliban in the peace process and calling upon the insurgents to stop fighting and start constructive dialogue with the Afghan government.

Since then, this consensus was further broadened and reinforced – both at the second Kabul conference held on 28 February 2018 and at the Tashkent conference (26-27 March 2018). At the Kabul conference, President Ghani, for the first time, offered unconditional peace talks to the Taliban.⁹ The Tashkent conference backed the Afghan government's peace offer¹⁰ and Uzbekistan offered to host intra-Afghan talks. Russia was represented in Tashkent by Foreign Minister Lavrov who also met with President Ghani on 28 March and suggested, inter alia, a trilateral Afghanistan-US-Russia meeting.

6. The June 2017 Kabul conference was ignored by Afghan Foreign Minister Rabbani, in a sign of his rift with President Ashraf Ghani.

7. In 2016-2017, China went further than Moscow in its direct contacts with the Taliban, repeatedly hosting the Taliban representatives to discuss many of the same issues as were addressed by regional powers in Moscow, including potential talks with Kabul (in February 2017, the Taliban delegation to China included head of the Qatar office, Mullah Sher Abbas Stanikzai).

8. After an over a year-long break, the Quadrilateral Group reconvened in October 2017, in Muscat, Oman.

9. For details of President Ghani's proposal "Offering Peace: Framing the Kabul Conference of February 28, 2018", see "Government discloses details of Ghani's peace offer", *TOLONews*, 28 February 2018. Ghani's proposal and the Taliban's continued intransigence also stimulated alternative intra-Afghan mediating initiatives by such key Islamist figures and former mujahideen leaders as Ismail Khan and Gulbiddin Hekmatyar who offered themselves as intermediaries to the Taliban.

10. Declaration of the Tashkent conference on Afghanistan: Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Connectivity, Tashkent, 28 March 2018, <http://uza.uz/en/politics/declaration-of-the-tashkent-conference-on-afghanistan-peace--28-03-2018>

Russia's emphasis on the need for a genuine political settlement that not only involves the Taliban, but also addresses the concerns of the regional states has been new—in the sense that it has been both explicitly articulated and promoted through practical diplomacy. As of 2018, the two main directions for this policy are:

- Support to direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, under the observation of other states and the UN, and with the US playing a constructive role. On 19 January 2018, Foreign Minister Lavrov, in Russia's most explicit statement on the matter, called for "direct talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban as soon as possible with a view to ending the fratricidal war, based on UN Security Council-approved criteria".¹¹
- Active contribution to the forming international consensus at the regional and extra-regional levels in favor of negotiated solution on Afghanistan and on conditions and contours of the process. While wary of endless multiplication of peace consultation formats and initiatives, Russia would prefer regional consultations that are broad enough to involve all key stakeholders and at the same time compact and focused (for instance, involving 12 key parties—the same 11 regional actors that took part in the Moscow format plus the United States).¹²

Also, the Moscow regional format on Afghanistan should not be seen as a replica of the Astana talks on Syria (if only for the reason that Russia's direct leverage on Afghanistan is far more limited than on Syria). But that very fact—with *Russia retaining a serious interest in yet a certain distance from Afghanistan*—may make Moscow well suited for a more neutral mediating role, especially in the broad, regionally inclusive process. A return to Moscow as the venue for regional peace talks at some point cannot be excluded. In reaction to an impasse in intra-Afghan talks, due to the Taliban's rejection of dialogue with Kabul and insistence on talking to the United States as the "occupying power", Moscow even offered to mediate negotiations between Washington/Kabul and the Taliban.¹³

Many in the West failed to grasp the main rationale for Russia's turn to more active support of negotiated solution on Afghanistan. Explanations ranged from the Pentagon's claims that Russia is "overtly lending

11. Lavrov's remarks at the UN Security Council session on "Formation of regional partnerships in Afghanistan and Central Asia", *op. cit.*

12. Presentations at the 1st meeting of the US-Russia Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism, EastWest Institute, Moscow, 30-31 October 2017, www.eastwest.ngo.

13. "Press review: Moscow to Mediate Talks with Taliban, US", TASS, 5 March 2018, <http://tass.com/pressreview/992722>.

legitimacy to the Taliban” solely to “undermine NATO efforts”¹⁴ to more sophisticated, but still inadequate interpretations (e.g. by Barnett Rubin, who conceded that Russia might have genuinely seen regionally inclusive peace talks as the most direct way to progress towards eventual stabilization, but insisted that the main reason it “hopes to sponsor a regionally owned settlement” was “to deprive the United States of any rationale to keep its military in Afghanistan”).¹⁵ These interpretations ignore the fact that Russia has long-standing concerns related to Afghanistan that go beyond the United States or the West, and that the US/NATO presence of any size did not and cannot remove.

14. “Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander US Forces-Afghanistan, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan”, United States Committee on Armed Services, 9 February 2017, p. 12, www.armed-services.senate.gov.

15. B. Rubin, “It’s Much Bigger than Afghanistan: US Strategy for a Transformed Region”, War on the Rocks, 25 April 2017, <https://warontherocks.com>.

Russia's main Afghanistan-related security concerns

As noted above, the two main Russian concerns that relate directly to Afghanistan are both security-related, and both involve so-called new security threats.

Narcotics

The main direct threat to Russia's homeland and population is posed by illicit drugs, especially heroin, of Afghan origin. The origin, scale and specifics of the Afghan heroin challenge for Russia deserve separate attention. So does the significant evolution of Russia's approach to that problem since the early 2000s, from supply-oriented, almost exclusive emphasis on eradication and enforcement, to a more comprehensive drug-control approach that acknowledges the need to combine enforcement with socio-economic development in the source country. While these issues are addressed in detail by the author elsewhere,¹⁶ this section provides a brief update.

In post-Taliban Afghanistan, during the US/NATO security presence, the overproduction of narcotics and increase in opiate output far exceeded the levels of the previous decades. The first peak came in 2004-2008; the second, and a much higher one, began in the mid-2010s, and is ongoing. In 2014, poppy cultivation in Afghanistan reached its historical peak of 224,000 ha—28 times larger than the area under poppy cultivation in 2001,¹⁷ the last year of Taliban rule. A decline in 2015, of the kind that normally follows heavy overproduction, was followed by a rise in 2016 in

16. E. Stepanova, "Afghan Narcotrafficking: A Joint Threat Assessment", Report by Joint US-Russia Working Group on the Afghan Narcotrafficking, New York, EastWest Institute, 2013, www.eastwest.ngo ; E. Stepanova, "Afghanistan after 2014: The Way Forward for Russia", *Russie.NEI.Visions*, No. 71, May 2013, pp. 11-16, www.ifri.org.

17. "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2016: Cultivation and Production", Vienna, UNODC, December 2016, p. 14, www.unodc.org. 2001 was the last year of Taliban rule, which saw an unprecedented decline in the area under poppy crops, by 91%, as a result of the Taliban's 2000 ban on poppy cultivation.

both areas under cultivation (by 10% from 2015) and opium production (by 43%).¹⁸

The main factors that explain annual fluctuations in the high levels of poppy crops and opiate production have nothing to do with limited, reluctant counternarcotics and policing, nor with the socio-economic policies of either the dysfunctional Afghan central government, or provincial authorities. In fact, their capacity to deal with the problem may be getting worse: despite the unprecedented surge in opiate production in the mid-2010s, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) recorded decreasing opiate seizures in Afghanistan¹⁹ (while total eradication of the opium poppy in 2016 declined by 91%).²⁰

The Western donors' support for counternarcotics or development efforts were not particularly relevant to the dynamics of the country's deeply embedded opium economy. Moscow can hardly be more critical here than some of the US official assessments: just before the announcement of Trump's revised Afghan strategy, US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John Sopko "noted that the USD 8.5 bln spent by Washington on the anti-drug campaign in Afghanistan points directly to its failure".²¹ The US/NATO military presence has been even less relevant—not because anyone could expect a military force to have the capacity or purpose of a policing or development agency to engage in drug control, but due to their overall failure to improve and ensure basic stability and security in Afghanistan.

The two main factors that affect yearly changes in Afghanistan's high opiate output appear to be *market corrections* (particularly large overproduction of opiates is usually followed by some decline next year, only to rise again later) and *yields* per hectare (which largely depend on weather conditions). The third factor—local security conditions—correlates with shifts in distribution of poppy cultivation and opiate production by district and province. To compensate for annual fluctuations in production and ensure unending opium and heroin supply, there are also substantial inventories in Afghanistan that store surplus opium for later use.

The new peak in opiate production in Afghanistan in the mid-2010s was reflected in the increase in opiate seizures and the scale of trafficking along all main routes of the diversified Afghan drug output: the largest

18. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

19. "World Drug Report 2016", New York, United Nations/UNODC, 2016, p. 29, www.unodc.org.

20. "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2016", *op. cit.*, p. 6.

21. Quoted in: "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the Drug Situation in Afghanistan", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 18 August 2017, www.mid.ru.

“Balkan route” through Iran and Turkey to Europe, the new “southern route” (to the Gulf, South Asia and Africa), and the “northern route” (through Central Asia to Russia).²² The “northern route” has shown particularly close correlation with the latest spike in opiate production in Afghanistan, with a resurgence following a limited temporary decline in 2008-2012.²³ The specifics of the northern route is that it is not only dominated by heroin, mostly destined for a single end-market (Russia), but also that a sizeable portion of heroin that goes via this route is produced in Afghanistan’s north and northeast, and only part comes from Afghanistan’s leading drug-producing region—the south (including areas controlled by the Taliban). In 2016, the northern/northeastern regions experienced the largest relative increase in poppy cultivation (by 324% and 55%, respectively), amidst deteriorating security situation.²⁴

Russia increased seizures of opiates on its own borders, is doing more on demand reduction at home and can do more in pressuring its Central Asian partners to improve drug control. However, there is little that it can do about reducing the opium economy *inside Afghanistan*, but to support: (a) any *de jure* or *de facto* authority inside Afghanistan that could put the narcotics problem under some control; (b) regional and broader international efforts to reduce the scale of the Afghan narcotics trafficking; (c) comprehensive development that goes beyond mere crop substitution and rural/agricultural sphere and could form a long-term alternative to the Afghan opium economy.

The ISIS factor

Instability, conflict and violent extremism in Afghanistan also have implications for Russia that may be less direct, but are no less important. This section addresses Russia’s assessment of the scale and nature of the new ISIS threat in Afghanistan and broader concerns about transnational violent extremism in the Central Asia context, including connections to Afghanistan. Moscow’s changing approach to the Taliban movement in view of the ISIS factor is addressed below.

The threat

Post-2014 alarmism about the potential spillover of violence from Afghanistan into the neighboring states started to fade away when it got a

22. “World Drug Report 2016”, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

23. “World Drug Report 2016”, *op. cit.*, pp. xiii, 30.

24. “Afghanistan Opium Survey 2016”, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

new impetus in the form of the emerging presence, since late 2014, of the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham”²⁵ (ISIS) in eastern Afghanistan. Since then the east of Afghanistan has remained the main area of limited ISIS presence (which, according to trusted independent observers, is unlikely to have exceeded 2 2,000 militants at any point).²⁶ Under pressure from the Afghan military, US air strikes, and rival militants, ISIS in Afghanistan (also known as Vilayat Khorasan) has been gradually losing control over its main territorial base. As of mid-2017, it reportedly controlled three districts in eastern Afghanistan, down from the previous 11, and had between 700 (according to the US military) and 1,500 (according to the Afghan government) fighters left.²⁷ Speculations about the scale of the ISIS outreach to the north/northeast of Afghanistan, outside its main area of control, are particularly shaky. The rebel scene in Afghanistan’s greater north displays a plethora of smaller-size militant actors from Central Asia and beyond, sometimes overlapping and forming alliances among themselves and with the Taliban, and sometimes at odds with each other and the Taliban.

The ISIS factor has posed three main challenges to Russia’s security: (a) the presence of several thousand Russian citizens among foreign fighters for ISIS and other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, and the potential return of some of them; (b) pledges of loyalty to ISIS by segments of the North Caucasian violent underground, and (c) the emergence, under the influence of ISIS propaganda, of homegrown micro-cells across Russia, comprised mainly of Russian citizens (radicalized Muslims and converts) and some migrants, but distinct from and often unrelated to the North Caucasian context.²⁸ None of these direct threats by ISIS to Russia’s security is linked to Afghanistan as such.

Any potential spillover of transnational violent extremism from Afghanistan more directly concerns Central Asian states—even as the real scale of these risks can be disputed. Three main ISIS-related challenges to Central Asia that are often conflated include, in order of declining significance: (a) mobilization of local radicals into foreign fighters in the

25 “Ash-Sham” is the Arabic for “Levant”.

26. Borhan Osman of the Afghan Analysts Network, quoted in “ISIS in Afghanistan: ‘Their Peak Is Over, but They Are Not Finished’”, *The Guardian*, 18 November 2016, www.theguardian.com.

27. “Two US troops killed during ISIS operation in Afghanistan”, Reuters, 27 April 2017. The highest Russian estimates of ISIS numbers in the east of Afghanistan (coming from Russia’s special envoy Zamir Kabulov’s office) stood at 3,500, as of October 2017.

28. E. Stepanova, “The ISIS Factor in Afghanistan: How Much of a Challenge to Russia?”, Bishkek Project Memo, 30 March 2017, <https://bishkekproject.com>; E. Stepanova, “The ‘Islamic State’ as a Security Problem for Russia: the Nature and Scale of the Threat”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 393, 2015, www.ponarseurasia.org.

Middle East and the start of their return since 2016;²⁹ (b) radicalization of local (semi)-autonomous cells, often under the influence of the “global jihad” propaganda, and (c) the potential for direct ISIS spillover from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

While the third challenge has so far remained the least practicable, it could grow—if and as, under tough security constraints in Central Asia’s “police states” on the return of militants from Syria and Iran (which explain relatively limited return rates to Central Asian states),³⁰ some foreign fighters of Central Asian origin, instead of heading for the third countries of the Middle East and Europe,³¹ accumulate in northern Afghanistan. That “grey area” is close to their homeland and populated by their ethnic kin (Afghan Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, etc). In that case, though, this would be a phenomenon of a different type, origin, location and goals than the original ISIS based in Nangarhar.

At present, terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan for Russia’s allies, partners and neighbors in Central Asia, including those posed by ISIS, are not very large. More generally, however, the ISIS factor did reactivate and reinforce the transnational jihadist vector in the cross-border Afghanistan-Pakistan context, tried to instigate sectarian clashes,³² and set up more aggressive standards for radical Islamist violence and

29. So far, Central Asia, and Eurasia in general, has seen a relatively limited number of returns, even as the information for most Central Asian states is scarce or unavailable (especially for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan). The return rates that could be estimated on the basis of available information range from those hardly exceeding 5-7.5% in late 2015 and 8.8% in 2016 for Kyrgyzstan and up to 11.3% for Tajikistan in mid-2016. These rates are comparable to official Russian estimates of returns to Russia (from 7% by 2016 to 10%, as of February 2017)—compared to a 50% return rate of ISIS fighters to the UK, as of mid-2016. See: FSB director Alexandr Bortnikov, quoted by TASS news agency, 15 December 2015, <http://tass.ru/politika/2528411>; “Country Reports on Terrorism 2015”, Washington DC: US Department of State Bureau on Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, 2016, www.state.gov; “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Treat of Returnees”, The Soufan Group report, October 2017, p. 10, 12-13, <http://thesoufancenter.org>; “Contest: The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism: Annual Report for 2015, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department”, CM9310, GOV.UK, July 2016, p. 7, www.gov.uk.

30. See previous note.

31. So far, Central Asian veterans of Iraq and Syria’s wars have actually caused greater trouble outside Central Asia: e.g. at least one of the perpetrators of the Istanbul airport attack in June 2016 and the sole perpetrator of the January 2017 Reina night club attack in the same city turned out to be of Central Asian origin, with ISIS experience.

32. Inside Afghanistan, as the local ISIS branch’s territorial base in the east of the country gradually diminished in 2016-2017, ISIS started to switch more actively to high-profile, mass-casualty terrorist attacks, including in Kabul, often directed against the minority Shia. This was a clear—though largely unsuccessful—attempt to instigate sectarian strife in Afghanistan, modeled upon the main areas of ISIS operation in the Middle East.

propaganda in the region.³³ To this one should add the heavy manipulation of the ISIS factor by most governments, (rival) security services and factions in and beyond the region.

Manipulation of the threat

Quite a few observers, especially in the West, suggested a degree of exaggeration and instrumentalization, by Russia itself, of the threat of transnational terrorism in the region, and the ISIS factor in Afghanistan in particular. Moscow's alleged purpose is usually interpreted as driven by geopolitics and aimed at pushing the Central Asian states to greater reliance on Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) on regional security matters,³⁴ at relatively low cost (given the limited real risk of large organized terrorism spillover and, consequently, of the need to mount a major CSTO security response). The most commonly cited evidence is infrequent, but widely publicized alarmist statements, especially by Russia's special envoy on Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov, that are usually timed to coincide with high-level political/military events on regional security in Central Asia.³⁵ The more substantive and worrying signs include:

- Attempts to manipulate the factor of labor migration to Russia from Central Asia for the purposes of radicalization: e.g. the May 2015 call by a renegade colonel of Tajikistan's spetsnaz, Gulmurod Khalimov (who joined ISIS in Syria), for the Tajik migrants in Russia to support ISIS.
- A tendency by some interest groups and forces *within* Russia to link

33. The main impact that ISIS has had in Afghanistan (and the Afghan-Pakistani context) is not so much the scale of its limited territorial control, as its effect vis-à-vis the Taliban, including on the movement's internal dynamics. The ISIS factor has forced the Taliban and other local Islamist groups to evolve. Its aggressive methods and modern information and advertising campaigns set new standards for violent Islamism in the region, and forced the Taliban to adjust its own propaganda, military tactics, approach to civilians, and treatment of prisoners. It is partly due to this dynamic that some recent Taliban operations have been marked by more demonstrative aggression and brutality. Radicalization of the Taliban—to outbid ISIS—has continued under the movement's new leader Haibatullah Akhunzada since mid-2016. In parallel, some other local Islamist groups marginalized by the Taliban but eager to rebrand themselves have looked to ISIS for a label, ideology, and propaganda.

34. R. Standish, "Putin to Central Asia: Let Daddy Save You from the Islamic State", *Foreign Policy*, 11 June 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com>.

35. On 19 April 2016, Kabulov claimed (in contrast to other Russian estimates, including official ones, and his own earlier assessments) that "there are now 10,000 Islamic State fighters in Afghanistan [...] A year ago there was a hundred. This growth over a year is spectacular"; "the Afghan branch of IS is definitely specialized against Central Asia. Russian is even one of their working languages..." and "they are being trained against Central Asia and Russia." In "10,000 ISIS Fighters in Afghanistan 'Trained to Expand to Central Asia, Russia'", *Russia Today*, 19 April 2016, www.rt.com.

new-style, ISIS-inspired homegrown terrorist cells across Russia *mainly* with migrants from Central Asia. Reasons for that may even be unrelated to geopolitics: among other things, attempts to reduce the problem of homegrown ISIS-inspired violent extremism in Russia primarily to direct “export” of terrorism from the neighboring regions, especially Central Asia, may be partly driven by the need to divert public attention from the shortcomings in preventive and preemptive counterterrorist work by the state security sector. Indeed, some of Russia’s fledgling homegrown micro-cells inspired by ISIS have involved migrants, mostly Central Asians (who generally dominate Russia’s labor migrant market). Perpetrators and planners of the 3 April 2017 terrorist bombing in Saint Petersburg metro that killed 16 and injured dozens (the first successful terrorist attack in Russia by ISIS adepts beyond North Caucasus and the first one that involved migrants) were of Central Asian origin. However, that should not obscure the facts that:

- The immediate perpetrator of the 3 April attack, Akbarjon Jalilov, was a naturalized Russian citizen.
- Radicalization usually occurs not before, but after migrants from Central Asia arrive in Russia, during their stay in the host country.
- Radicalization of labor migrants in Russia has not (yet) become a widespread phenomenon (a pattern typical for the first-generation of labor migrants overwhelmed by elementary economic survival and support for families left behind).

In any case, the main thing pertinent to this analysis is that radicalization of Central Asian migrants in Russia is hardly a product of any “direct export” of the ISIS factor from Afghanistan.

Much as foreign observers suspect Russia of trying to oversell the threat of transnational terrorism in the region, Russia also suspects attempts to manipulate the ISIS issue in Afghanistan against its own interests. These alleged attempts range from sporadic waves of reporting in Western and international media and other sources about sudden sharp escalation of the ISIS presence in northern Afghanistan to rumors about “redeployment” of jihadists from other parts of the country to the north by unmarked helicopters,³⁶ and reports that ISIS “has been coming under pressure... to increase activities in Central Asia, using its well-developed

36. Since 2001, control of Afghan air space has rested with the US military.

contacts with Central Asian jihadist groups in northern Afghanistan”.³⁷ In May 2017, Russia’s MFA formally called the UN Security Council’s attention to “unidentified” aircraft “that were observed to have provided support to local ISIS militants”.³⁸ Such covert actions (had they taken place) could be attempts to remind Russia about its vulnerability on the “southern flank” and to divert its attention from other security issues or regions, where it is more active and has higher leverage (such as Syria or Donbass). Some Russian analysts have doubted whether the purported ISIS buildup in the north of Afghanistan is real or a covert way to pressure Russia and the CSTO along the Afghan-Central Asian borders.^{39, 40}

Whatever the case, for Russia’s policy on Afghanistan, the ISIS factor is important not so much in and of itself as it is in the context of broader regional interests and international implications, and its effects on, and relations with, the Taliban.

37. A. Guistozi, “The Islamic State in ‘Khorasan’: A Nuanced View”, RUSI Commentary, 5 February 2016, <https://rusi.org>.

38. Information and Press Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 30 May 2017.

39. Discussions at the 6th meeting of the Joint US-Russia Working Group on Afghan Narcotrafficking, 6 October 2015. See www.carnegie.org.

40. Review of the round table on “The evolving situation in Afghanistan in 2016” at the Russian International Affairs Council, 18 April 2016, in *Puti k miru i bezopasnosti* [Pathways to Peace and Security], No. 1(50), IMEMO, 2016, pp. 132-134, www.imemo.ru.

Russia's approach to the Taliban

In 2001-2002, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Russia provided support to local Northern Alliance forces in Afghanistan who cooperated with the US-led coalition in ousting the *de facto* Taliban government as a host of the al-Qaeda leadership. When, years later, key Western and some regional stakeholders and the Kabul government itself started to explore the possibility of negotiating with the Taliban insurgency, Moscow did not officially oppose the national reconciliation process. In the post-2014 context, Russian officials repeatedly noted that “defeating the Taliban by military means is no longer an option”.⁴¹ It is against this background that Russia gradually improved its relations with Pakistan, as the main regional player with some leverage over the Taliban. By that time, most regional powers (including China) and many extraregional actors (the United States, the UK, the Gulf states) had already had or were having some contact with the Taliban.

In this context, reports that first surfaced in October 2015 in both US and Russian media about Russia's limited contacts with the Taliban should have hardly raised an eyebrow.⁴² In a couple of months, these rumors were picked up, now in an alarmist way, by the London-based *Sunday Times* and the Tajik branch of the US-sponsored Radio Liberty (Ozodi). The initial rumors were later confirmed by the Russian international media outlet Sputnik and then officially by Russia's MFA, which acknowledged that such contacts had taken place, for the purpose of sharing information on the ISIS threat in Afghanistan.⁴³ On 28 December 2015, Russia's ambassador to Tajikistan, Igor Lyakin-Frolov, confirmed that Russia, through mediation by “some countries”, had talks with representatives of

41. See interview by Z. N. Kabulov to TASS information agency [in Russian], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 30 December 2015, www.mid.ru.

42. “Russia Has Communication Channel with the Taliban—Foreign Ministry Official”, Sputnik, 26 October 2015, <https://sputniknews.com>; S. Yusufzai, “A Taliban-Russia Team-up against ISIS?”, *The Daily Beast*, 26 October 2015, www.thedailybeast.com.

43. “Zamir Kabulov: ‘Interesy talibov po bor’be s IGIL v Afganistane ob’ektivno sovpadaut s rossijskimi’” [Z. Kabulov, “the Taliban's interests in fighting ISIS are objectively in line with Russia's”], Interfax, 23 December 2015, www.interfax.ru. Interview with the Russian MFA's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova in: A. Roth, “Russia Is Sharing Information with the Taliban to Fight the Islamic State”, *The Washington Post*, 23 December 2015, www.washingtonpost.com.

the Taliban's "moderate factions" in Tajikistan, even though these talks "did not lead to any results".⁴⁴ The obvious rationale for such contacts was explained by Viktor Vasilyev, Russia's representative to CSTO: "There are tensions between the Taliban and the ISIS militants penetrating Afghanistan from abroad. So, from a tactical point of view, one should use these tensions, and it would be good if these two groups confronted one another on the territory that lies beyond our [CSTO] area of responsibility".⁴⁵

The Taliban downplayed contacts with Russia from the start (even though the first leaks about such contacts had come from their military committee) and denied they needed any help in fighting ISIS.⁴⁶ Later, a couple of Taliban spokesmen confirmed that contacts with Russia took place, but did not extend beyond "moral and political support".⁴⁷

Russia, in turn, minimized any necessary contacts to "communication channels" only, and repeatedly stressed its commitment to the UN Security Council's sanctions against the Taliban (which Moscow itself had earlier helped to impose), including a ban on arms deliveries.⁴⁸ On 8 December 2016, the ambassador to Kabul, Alexander Mantytskiy, described Russia's contacts with the Taliban as "not intensive".⁴⁹ Moscow again confirmed that it "does not lend any support to the Taliban movement" in the MFA's first official reaction to the announcement of the Trump administration's revised strategy on Afghanistan.⁵⁰ In contrast to the United States, which removed the Taliban from the State Department's

44. "Putin vstrechalsia s rukovodstvom 'Taliban' v Dushanbe?" [Did Putin meet with the Taliban leadership in Dushanbe?], Radio Ozodi, 28 December 2017, <https://rus.ozodi.org>.

45. "Viktor Vasil'ev: 'Schitaem, chto predprinimaemykh segodnia mer dostatochno dlia otrazheniia ugrozy IGIL iz Afganistana'" [Viktor Vasilyev: "We consider existing measures sufficient to repel any ISIS threat from Afghanistan"], Arms of Russia Information Agency, 29 March 2016, www.arms-expo.ru.

46. S. Qazi, "Taliban Denies Sharing ISIL Intelligence with Russia," *Al-Jazeera*, 26 December 2015, www.aljazeera.com; "Russia Has Communication Channel with the Taliban", *op. cit.*

47. Quoted in: H. Shalizi, J. Smith, "Ties between Russia and the Taliban Worry Afghan, US officials", Reuters, 8 December 2016, www.reuters.com.

48. A. Roth, "Russia Is Sharing Information with the Taliban to Fight the Islamic State", *op. cit.*; "Viktor Vasil'ev: 'Schitaem, chto predprinimaemykh segodnia mer dostatochno dlia otrazheniia ugrozy IGIL iz Afganistana'", *op. cit.*; "Deputy Foreign Minister Oleg Syromolotov's interview with the Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 30 September 2016, www.mid.ru.

49. See "Ties between Russia and the Taliban Worry Afghan, US officials", *op. cit.*

50. "Briefing by Russia's MFA Spokeswoman M. V. Zakharova", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 24 August 2017, www.mid.ru.

list of “Foreign Terrorist Organizations” in 2010, Russia has not reviewed its listing of the Taliban as a terrorist group since 2003.⁵¹

Overall, since late 2015, several meetings with the Taliban representatives appear to have taken place, both in Moscow and in Tajikistan (at Russia's 201st division base). Although the level of such contacts remains, in Kabulov's words, “a closed topic”, they have likely involved interlocutors that:

- Are mid-level figures within the movement.
- Had previously been in contact with states that mediated and facilitated such access for Russia, especially Pakistan.
- Represent the core of the complex and diverse movement, and are seen as reflecting the opinion of the mainstream leadership of Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada.⁵²

Needless to say, Russia also firmly condemns and remains uncompromised in relation to the most extreme Taliban-linked elements such as the Haqqani network, “whose ideology is more radical, closer to Daesh”,⁵³ in contrast to the “main leadership, current leadership, and the majority of Taliban now” that are seen as “a predominantly local force” that “gave up the global jihadism idea”.⁵⁴

Overall, Moscow's official policy line has remained to support the increased functionality and legitimacy of the Afghan state, including the National Unity Government and the Afghan national armed and security forces. As a secondary tactic, it also maintains minimal communication channels with the Taliban, as a way of keeping track of their approach to the security threat about which there is shared concern across the region—the ISIS factor—and also to test their degree of openness to peace talks with the central government. Remarkably, Russia established contacts with the Taliban later than virtually anyone else in and beyond the region. Moscow has also kept these contacts more limited than those maintained

51. “Edinyj federal'nyj spisok organizacij, v tom chisle inostrannykh i mezhdunarodnykh organizacij, priznannyh v sootvetstvii s zakonodatel'stvom Rossijskoj Federacii terroristicheskimi” [Federal list of organizations, including foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation], FSB, last updated in June 2017, www.fsb.ru.

52. Presentations at the 1st meeting of the US-Russia Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism, EastWest Institute, Moscow, 30-31 October 2017, www.eastwest.ngo. Mullah Haibatullah was appointed as a new Taliban leader by the movement's supreme council (shura) in May 2016, following the death of his predecessor Mullah Akhtar Mansour, in a US drone strike.

53. Daesh is an abbreviation of the ISIS name in Arabic.

54. “Exclusive interview with Russian diplomat Zamir Kabulov”, Anadolu Agency, 31 December 2016, <https://aa.com.tr>.

with the Taliban by China, the Gulf States, the United States, the UK and, more recently, Iran.

The main source of rumors about Russia supplying weapons and ammunition to the Taliban was media briefings or informal talks by Pentagon officials.⁵⁵ Moscow saw these unverified, and perhaps even unverifiable, claims as dictated by (a) the need to shift the blame for failures in the US security strategy in Afghanistan on a politically convenient scapegoat (such as Russia, given the bad state of the overall US-Russia relationship), (b) Pentagon's use of the Russia factor as an additional argument for domestic lobbying for expanding funding and US forces on the ground; (c) attempts to spoil and discredit regional peace efforts and, specifically, Moscow's role as a facilitator, and (d) perhaps also a form of "trolling" Moscow on Afghanistan (in revenge for it having effectively outplayed the US military and diplomacy elsewhere, particularly on Syria).

Another source of speculation, sometimes even more extreme, has been several active and retired Afghan officials, commonly with a strong vested self-interest policy agenda.⁵⁶ Their claims⁵⁷ lack evidence and have been denied by other defense and government officials in Afghanistan, as well as by Russia, the Tajik authorities, etc. These rumors are also another episode in the favorite Afghan "name and blame" game—a never-ending pool of conspiracy theories widespread among politicians, security officials and the media, especially the Kabul elites (e.g. about Russian instructors among the Taliban in the south, disguised as medics, or omnipotent Iranian advisors to the Taliban across the country, or Chinese military presence on Afghan territory, etc). The concentration and timing of some of these speculations suggests orchestrated disinformation campaigns: e.g. a wave of rumors about Russia's "presence" in Afghanistan, especially

55. Even as the first US military official to testify on the record on Russia's "support" for the Taliban, the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, was careful to stop short of mentioning any arms deliveries or financial support, and referred only to political and diplomatic contacts, described as Russia "lending legitimacy" to the insurgency. "Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander US Forces-Afghanistan, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan", *op. cit.*

56. For instance, ex-governor Muhammad Omar Safi and police chief Qasim Jangalbagh of Kunduz province, whose capital city became the first provincial capital to be briefly captured by the Taliban in September 2015. "Dushanbe Probing Claim Taliban Tanks Being Repaired in Tajikistan, Gandhara (Radio Liberty-Radio Free Europe service for Afghanistan and Pakistan), 2 January 2017, <https://gandhara.rferl.org>; H. Shalizi, J. Smith, "Ties between Russia and the Taliban Worry Afghan, US officials", *op. cit.*

57. E.g. about direct contacts between high-level Russian officials, including President Putin, with top Taliban figures (the late Mullah Mansour or the Taliban shadow governor of Kunduz province, Mullah Abdul Salam) or about Taliban tanks being repaired by the Russian military in Tajikistan and shipped across the Afghan-Tajik border.

“on the side” of the Taliban, in the spring of 2017, was timed to coincide with the April round of the Moscow regional consultations on Afghanistan and aimed at spoiling them. Possible motivations behind such waves of claims include (a) attempts by segments of the Afghan government, its foreign backers and several other provincial and political strongmen to discredit Iran, Russia and China among the Afghans; (b) the search for foreign scapegoats to distract attention from the government's counterinsurgency failures, and (c) attempts to shift dissatisfaction among many Afghans with insecurity and the Western presence to others, and to prepare the public for the build-up of US forces in Afghanistan under the Trump administration.

With concerns about the ISIS factor as Russia's most obvious rationale for limited contacts with the Taliban, these contacts cannot be placed out of the context of Moscow's broader rapprochement with Pakistan. In fact, it is Pakistan's leverage on the Taliban that was one of the drivers of Moscow's reach-out to Islamabad. Russia itself lacked any leverage on developments inside Afghanistan, especially on the insurgency (which, among other things, *de facto* controls rural areas in the south where up to half of Russia-destined heroin originates from). As Russia gradually lost hope that any force inside Afghanistan could exert pressure on the Taliban, it tried to reach out to those actors who can (to make sure that the Taliban's interests are confined to Afghanistan and do not extend to Central Asia, and to promote Russia's drug-control interests in case of talks between the government and the insurgency). Islamabad also views ISIS as yet another fuse that could ignite violent extremism in its already troubled tribal areas along the Afghan border and as a rival of the Taliban (which Pakistan sees as a conduit of its influence in Afghanistan). Shared concern about the ISIS factor has become an additional rationale for Russia's rapprochement with Pakistan. Islamabad's role is also critical for the US and NATO supply lines that Pakistan can cut in reaction to increased Western security pressure, as it has repeatedly done previously. While hardly the main driver for Moscow's rapprochement with Islamabad, this factor should not be discounted.

A more sensitive aspect reveals a high degree of general mistrust and suspicion that marks Russia's perception of the US and Western actions and intentions, including in Afghanistan (and *vice versa*). In this context, Russia's decision to reach out to ISIS's main local rival and the US-backed Afghan government's main real military opponent on the ground (the Taliban) may be a warning signal of Russia's awareness of possible US manipulation of the ISIS threat in Afghanistan against Russia's interests

(see section 3.2.) and of potential reaction to any covert efforts of that kind should they take place or continue.

Finally, Russia's evolving approach to the Taliban is linked to Moscow's new role in joining efforts to facilitate or mediate regional peace consultations on Afghanistan. None of Russia's own concerns about Afghanistan can be alleviated as long as the armed conflict there continues in full force. This makes Moscow genuinely interested in stabilization in Afghanistan—and a mere combination of military pressure on the Taliban and Western support for the Afghan government has not achieved this, nor ever could. Considering that Russia itself remains severely constrained when it comes to any hard security track vis-à-vis Afghanistan (and has minimal direct policy leverage with the Afghan government, particularly with the Arg Palace—the Presidential Office), is there much it can do to affect the situation? Not much, except to push for stabilization through a regionally inclusive peace process. And that requires having contacts with all major parties in question, including the Taliban.

Russia and the United States/NATO factor

Stabilization in Afghanistan can only be achieved through an intra-Afghan political settlement that involves the Taliban, in one form or another, and takes account of some of the legitimate interests of key regional stakeholders. This process, however, needs to be coupled with more consolidated international efforts against explicitly transnationalized forms of violent extremism such as ISIS, the Haqqani network and the like. The United States under the Trump administration is posed to play a lead role in counterterrorist efforts in Afghanistan. And serious progress on the peace track is not likely in the long run if it is opposed by Washington.

In fact, one of the goals of Moscow's new activism on Afghanistan in late 2016-2017 could be to stimulate Washington to come up with more strategic clarity about what it wants there in terms of peace, conflict and security – and, perhaps, it did.

The post-2014 background

In addressing security threats in Afghanistan that may have strategic implications for Russia's interests, Moscow has to rely on the Afghan state and the Afghan national armed and security forces, which the United States and some of its NATO allies continue to support, including through a limited military presence. As, by the end of 2014, the US and NATO security presence was reduced to an almost symbolic one (less than 8,500 US troops, as of February 2017), Russia started losing interest in the US/NATO as an external "security guarantor" and put its main bets on cooperation over Afghanistan with the regional powers.

The emergence of the new ISIS threat in Afghanistan could have become a new genuine, shared interest with the United States, regardless of other policy differences with Washington (on Afghanistan or elsewhere). Donald Trump's unexpected victory in the November 2016 presidential elections also helped revive Russia's attention to the US role in, and potential cooperation with the new administration on, Afghanistan. Emerging elements of the Trump administration's foreign and security policy that looked quite promising to Russia included:

- Making counterterrorism, including the fight against ISIS, a

centerpiece of US foreign policy once again, with the main focus on the same regions and conflicts that are of serious antiterrorism concern to Russia: the Syria-Iraq area and Afghanistan.

- ▀ Rejecting the policy discourse of “regime change” and “democratization at any cost”, even at the cost of stability and antiterrorism.
- ▀ Inclining towards a more pragmatic approach to Russia, despite unprecedented and mounting domestic elite pressure and prejudice against it, with an emphasis on counterterrorism as the main impulse if not for a “fresh start” or revival of full-scale cooperation, then at least for some normalization of bilateral relations.

However, potential rapprochement with the United States on Afghanistan did not materialize even under what appeared as the best of circumstances. It was hampered not only by the general state of US-Russia relations, but also by new complications specific to Afghanistan. While some observers, including this author, had earlier believed that, in contrast to the more divisive Syria or Ukraine agenda, limited cooperation on Afghanistan could remain one area relatively unharmed by the sharp deterioration in US-Russia relations, that was not the case. The anti-Russian sanctions regime and growing distrust of Moscow by the US Congress and the Pentagon produced new complications:

- ▀ The Pentagon decided to stop acquiring Russian helicopters for the needs of the Afghan armed forces, which continue to suffer heavily from a shortage of air support.⁵⁸ The US Department of Defense had submitted its funding request to begin a transition from Russian Mi-17 transport helicopters to US-made UH-60s in November 2016, even prior to a formal ban on funding any US military cooperation with Russia imposed by the US Congress on 2 December, and even as the transition threatened to temporarily “widen the critical Afghan aerial capability gap”. The Pentagon’s attempts to present it “as an Afghan Air Force initiative... to replace the unsustainable Russian-manufactured aircraft fleet”⁵⁹ went against multiple evidence to the contrary, including the Russian helicopters’ proven efficiency and popularity among the Afghan military and Afghan officials’ repeated requests for

58. In 2010 and 2012, the Pentagon struck deals to buy Mi-17 transport helicopters from Russia’s state arms export agency, Rosoboronexport.

59. “Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander US Forces-Afghanistan, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan”, *op. cit.*, p. 17; “Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, Commander, US Central Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of US Central Command”, United States Central Command, 9 March 2017, p. 22, www.centcom.mil.

new aircraft, technical/service support and spare parts from Russia.⁶⁰ Moscow took this as another unnecessary hostile action by Washington on a cooperative issue that used to be resilient to ups and downs in bilateral relations.

- Russia also started to suspect the United States of covertly manipulating the threat of transnational jihadist terrorism in Afghanistan (see section 3). Moscow's mistrust of US intentions on Afghanistan was reinforced by the Pentagon's trolling since 2016, which tried to misrepresent Russia's limited communication channels with the mainstream Taliban faction(s)—something that Washington had practiced itself—as Moscow's full-scale support of the insurgency against Kabul and the US military presence (see section 4).

US revised Afghan strategy, evolving policy, and Russia's reaction

On August 21, 2017, following a months-long review process, President Trump finally laid out his administration's revised strategy on Afghanistan, declared to be based on “principled realism”—a third consecutive US presidential strategy on Afghanistan. The main changes from the Obama strategy were:

- A shift from a deadline-oriented to an open-ended, conditions-based security commitment for an indefinite period of time, with clear rejection of any premature, Iraq-style “exit strategy”.
- Meeting the US military's long-time requests and giving authority to the Pentagon to send additional troops to Afghanistan,⁶¹ with their priority tasks remaining counterterrorist operations and training of the Afghan forces. The US commitment to send in more troops was echoed by NATO, with over a dozen member states having expressed readiness to expand their contribution to the ongoing “Resolute Support” operation.
- A policy shift from “national-building” back to the primacy of counterterrorist goals and agenda: “We are not nation-building again... We are killing terrorists”.⁶²

60. Including a request by the head of the Afghan MFA's department on policy and strategic planning, Muhammed Haidari: “Rossiia rassmotrit zapros Afganistana o pomoshchi” [Russia will review Afghanistan's request for support], *Izvestia*, 17 May 2017, <https://iz.ru/news>.

61. While the strategy did not specify the number of troops or benchmarks for their success, the Pentagon's reinforcement brought the total number to about 14,500 in 2017.

62. “Full Transcript and Video: Trump's Speech on Afghanistan”, *The New York Times*, 21 August 2017. www.nytimes.com.

- While the strategy was vague on most other policy issues, it at least attempted to treat Afghanistan not only *per se*, but also as part of a broader South Asia, although in a highly selective and unbalanced manner (propping up India's role while laying the main blame on Pakistan and ignoring Iran).

On the one hand, in Russia, “the very fact that the new U.S. administration has come with a strategy on Afghanistan” was “taken positively”.⁶³ It was understood in Moscow that Trump's revision of the US strategic outlook on Afghanistan was driven not only by geopolitics, but also by a mix of domestic drivers, genuine antiterrorism concerns and instrumentalization of antiterrorism for broader policy purposes. It reflected the growing influence of generals such as James Mattis and H.R. McMaster at the time, at the expense of Trump's more isolationist and non-interventionist advisers such as Stephen Bannon, and the need for Trump to look tough on terrorists and on foreign policy matters, to make up for elite dissatisfaction and domestic turmoil.

On the other hand, Moscow remained “unimpressed” by the revised US strategy.⁶⁴ Specifically, Russia complained about the still “insufficiently emphasized” ISIS threat and the “totally ignored” narcotics issue in the strategy (both key Russian Afghanistan-related concerns).⁶⁵ Also, Moscow expected more on the role of key regional powers and on the US approach to a political solution (beyond Trump's vague suggestion that “someday, after an effective military effort, perhaps it will be possible to have a political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan [*it.—ES*]”). Washington's lack of willingness to consider the interests of regional powers appeared particularly problematic in view of any prospects for a regionally inclusive, negotiated solution or peace process for Afghanistan – both (a) considering the long-term trend toward the growing role of these powers in regional security, conflict and peace matters and the need for a regionally inclusive negotiation process on Afghanistan, and (b) against the background of the US simultaneously worsening relations with two Afghan neighbors with the strongest leverage in and on Afghanistan (Iran and Pakistan). This was aggravated by the Pentagon's increasingly lead role in US policy and decision-making on Afghanistan (well-reflected in the revised strategy's “emphasis on solving the Afghan

63. MFA representative quoted by Interfax in “Istochnik: MID Rossii ne vpechatlila novaia strategiiia SShA po Afganistanu” [Source: Russia's MFA is not impressed by the US new strategy on Afghanistan], Gazeta.ru, 22 August 2017, www.gazeta.ru.

64. *Ibid.*

65. “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova”, 24 August 2017, www.mid.ru.

problem by force”, as described by the Russian MFA⁶⁶), coupled with weakening of the US diplomatic arsenal and the State Department (including a lack of either a US ambassador or special representative on Afghanistan at the critical time of the new military build-up in 2017).

In sum, Moscow's assessment of Trump's strategy on Afghanistan was not that different from that of many observers and stakeholders (other than the Afghan government), in finding more continuity than change in what appeared to remain a combination of military force with policy and security pressure on Pakistan—an approach “in sync with the recipes prescribed for Afghanistan by the previous administration, that ... did not produce positive results in the security sphere”.⁶⁷ If the second Obama administration's policy on Afghanistan looked like “*less war, no peace*”, then Trump's Afghan strategy promised “*more war, no peace*”. This approach was not necessarily in direct conflict with Russia's key interests in Afghanistan (stabilization and reduction of the opium economy), but could not advance the former and was irrelevant to the latter.

As the time has passed, however, despite remaining lack of clarity on the part of Washington regarding many aspects of its Afghan policy, the situation started to look more ambiguous – and somewhat less pessimistic.

First, the revised strategy and its implementation left enough potential for overlap in Afghanistan-related interests between Russia and the United States on the need to confront ISIS and other transnational jihadists. Trump identified the fight against ISIS as the US primary goal in Afghanistan, even as his first steps in that direction were more demonstrative than substantive (dropping the Massive Ordnance Air Burst Bomb (MOAB) on a remote area in Nangarhar, eastern Afghanistan, on 13 April 2017 was an obvious military overkill for a purely tactical destruction, but a loud political message to signal a US “comeback” to the region.) Still, Russia supports *any* operations against ISIS in the region, be it by the United States and the Afghan military in Afghanistan or, for instance, across the border by Pakistan. On 14 December 2017, President Putin, at the same annual press-conference where he announced his plans for reelection, expressed hope to “join efforts with the United States” to address Afghanistan-related challenges, above all international terrorism.”⁶⁸ Despite all constraints on US-Russia cooperation (as bilateral relations further soured in 2017-2018 and mutual trolling on Afghanistan

66. *Ibid.*

67. Discussions at the 1st meeting of the US-Russia Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism, EastWest Institute, Moscow, 30-31 October 2017, www.eastwest.ngo.

68. Vladimir Putin annual press conference, 14 December 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

continued), objectively, Russia's interest in the US security role there may even increase in the short to mid-term—if, for instance, the ISIS threat increases in northern Afghanistan.

Second, from the geopolitical perspective, Russia has hardly rejoiced in the United States maintaining what seems an indefinite strategic outpost in Afghanistan, seen in Moscow as intended, *inter alia*, to keep an eye and some extra leverage, right from the heart of Eurasia, on Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia's own interests in Central Asia. However, Russia does not appear to be overly concerned about the US limited build-up either. While observing the United States getting indefinitely sucked down in what is already the longest American overseas military operation is not something that Moscow would lament, there is also recognition that the US presence has some useful security role to play in Afghanistan. Furthermore, even an expanded US security presence could only have tactical results on the ground, while any larger deployment depends, to a significant extent, on cooperation with regional powers on transit and access. Pakistan is an unreliable transit partner, as it has had its own grievances over US behavior in the region (including undeclared US drone attacks on its territory), was named as the main spoiler in the revised US strategy on Afghanistan and had US military aid to it suspended in January 2018 (over continued support to Taliban in Afghanistan). Considering the miserable state of US-Russia relations, coupled with Trump's return to a very harsh approach to Tehran, and the US/Western sanctions' regimes against both countries, transit routes to/from Afghanistan via both Russia and Iran are closed.⁶⁹

Third, some of the worst expectations about US evolving policy on Afghanistan in relation to political/negotiation and regional tracks have not materialized. This refers to the initial impression of Trump administration's *absolute* priority to open-ended military presence over stabilization through a negotiated and regionally inclusive solution. Despite often conflicting signals from Washington, the 2017 increase in troop levels appeared to be supplemented in the first half of 2018 by at least some diplomatic steps to explore the negotiation and regional tracks. The best evidence has been President Ghani's offer to hold direct and unconditional peace talks made at the February 2018 Kabul conference – that would have been inconceivable without prior US endorsement and coordination and was explicitly supported by US senior diplomatic

69. Even if the US tries to search for alternative supply routes via Central Asia, e.g. bypassing Russia, that would push it towards greater regional cooperation, including with Russia without whose open or tacit endorsement no such plan is feasible.

officials,⁷⁰ who also welcomed its regional backing at the Tashkent conference in March.

How genuine and lasting are these US diplomatic impulses and some renewed US interest in the regional context, especially vis-à-vis India, China, and Central Asian states – or are they more of a diplomatic cover to create more favorable conditions for the US military presence, operations and transit needs – remains to be seen. There has been little or no sign of US willingness to constructively reach out to either Iran or Pakistan without engaging whom stabilization in Afghanistan is not a prospect. Whatever the case, it does not change the square one reality: in Afghanistan, heavier military/security footprints merely give rise to stronger resistance. Given the weakness of the Afghan government, the vacuum created by ISIS will still be filled by the Taliban. As the insurgents cannot be defeated militarily, some form of political/power-sharing solution should be found that integrates at least the main Afghan-based and Afghanistan-focused factions of the Taliban. And in the long run, the United States remains critical to the political process on Afghanistan, both as the main sponsor of the Afghan government, which would not take any initiative if opposed by Washington, and as the main actor that the Taliban (who do not recognize the legitimacy of the Kabul government) is ready to talk to.

Recommendations for cooperation or parallel actions

- ▀ *Starting the dialogue on the prospects and contours for peace negotiations in Afghanistan*, both bilaterally and, preferably, in the trilateral Afghanistan-US-Russia format; stepping up relevant consultations in Track-2 format; supporting regional peace consultations on Afghanistan to back and reinforce the Kabul process.
- ▀ *Restoring bilateral US-Russia Working Group on Afghanistan*. Institutionalized bilateral dialogue and coordination on Afghanistan (the US-Russia bilateral working group on Afghanistan established in 2000) predated not only the short-lived Obama-Medvedev “thaw” since 2009, but even the 9/11 attacks. It is not accidental that the Bilateral Working Group on Afghanistan later morphed into the US-Russia Counterterrorism Working Group, one of the bilateral

70. E.g., US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Alice Wells: U.S. Presses Taliban to Accept Afghan Peace Talks Senior U.S. Diplomat Urges an 'Afghan-Led' Peace Process, US Institute of Peace Analysis, 8 March 2018.

mechanisms cancelled by Washington in 2014. This group should be restored in its initial format, as a *US-Russia Working Group on Afghanistan*, regardless of whether any top-level institutionalized bilateral formats are.

- In the security sphere, a “natural” area for US-Russia cooperation was and should be in *supplying arms, military equipment and munitions to the Afghan national military and security forces*. A modest increase in US troop levels in Afghanistan, especially to the extent that they target ISIS and other jihadists, is more in line than in conflict with Russia’s interests, as is the expansion of US military and security aid to the Afghan armed forces and security sector. Moscow’s own “readiness to continue support to Kabul in training and equipping its security sector”⁷¹ should be welcomed, rather than opposed or sabotaged by Washington, both as a contribution to the Afghan security potential and as a way to dispel US hyped concerns over Russia’s contacts with the Taliban. It is also the simplest and most direct way to make Russia better disposed towards the US role and presence in Afghanistan, should the US decide at some point that this is what it needs. Despite all current constraints, unblocking of select aspects of bilateral cooperation is possible, of which revival of direct cooperation on security assistance to Afghanistan could be top of the list.
- The US has a lead role to play in *reactivating regular NATO-Russia consultations on Afghanistan* at the gradually revived NATO-Russia Council.⁷²
- The lack of *any* contacts and interaction between NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization on Afghanistan (which long predates the latest Russia-West rift) is a progression of the Russia-NATO broader geostrategic rivalries in this and other regions (above all, in Europe and especially on Ukraine). While the gap between NATO and CSTO is unlikely to be reversed in the more “traditional” military-political sphere, it could and should be bridged in the sphere of countering terrorism, violent extremism and transnational crime in Afghanistan and the broader region, at least in the form of some dialogue and information-sharing. The CSTO remains the main umbrella regional institution for security cooperation on counterterrorism in Central Asia, while NATO is set to remain in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future.

71. President Putin, quoted by Z. Kabulov on 17 May 2017, in Asatryan.

72. Following disagreements at the 2 June 2014 meeting on Ukraine, the NATO-Russia Council did not meet for two years. Irregular meetings—but not cooperative projects—have resumed since April 2016.

- One workable direction for resuming cooperation between the security services (and financial institutions) is to step up information/request exchange—both bilaterally, through respective financial intelligence bodies, and through contacts within multilateral frameworks such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Paris Pact, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) financial watchdog Financial Action Task Force (FATF)—on illicit financial money flows from Afghanistan and on ways and hubs of transnational laundering of drug revenues that, among other sources, fund terrorism.

Russia-Europe: potential for dialogue and cooperation?

For Russia's relations with the EU/EU-plus Europe, Afghanistan is just one—and not the most important—of five conflict/crisis areas *outside Europe* on the EU-Russia agenda (along with Iraq, Syria, Libya, and North Korea). All five, in turn, account for less in Russia's relations with Europe than the situation in Ukraine (and for less than the situation in other post-Soviet Eastern Partnership states).

For Europe, however, Afghanistan is a larger human security concern than for the United States, if only for two main reasons: the flows of migrants and narcotics. Afghans are the second largest group of migrants to the EU, with 267,000 irregular arrivals in 2015 alone.⁷³ While the United States is not directly threatened by narcotics of Afghan origin,⁷⁴ Europe is comparable to Russia in the size and value of its end-market for Afghan opiates. The latest UNODC estimate of the value of the Afghan opiates market in Western and Central Europe was 18.1 bln USD,⁷⁵ equaling the highest estimate of the value of the Russian opiate market (USD 16-18 bln in 2014).⁷⁶ The long-term decline in heroin use in Europe (since the late 1990s) started to reverse, as, for instance, shown by: (a) an increase in heroin-related deaths in the UK in 2012-2014, (b) an increase in estimates of problem opiate users in France, and signs of revival of the heroin market in some parts of that country in recent years, and (c) growing heroin prevalence rates in Italy in 2008-2014.⁷⁷

Two main potential tracks for Moscow's dialogue with Europe (both as a collective entity and with lead European countries) coincide with Russia's long-term interests in Afghanistan and are also among the EU priorities

73. "EU-Afghanistan Relations Factsheet", European External Action Service, 17 February 2017, <https://eeas.europa.eu>.

74. Afghan heroin comprises 3-6% of the US heroin market. E. Stepanova, "Afghan Narcotrafficking: A Joint Threat Assessment", *op. cit.*, p. 13.

75. Based on the 2009-2012 data. "Drug Money: The Illicit Proceeds of Opiates Trafficked on the Balkan Route", UNODC, 2015, pp. 7, 9.

76. "Financial Flows Linked to the Production and Trafficking of Afghan Opiates", FATF/OECD, 2014, p. 5, www.fatf-gafi.org.

77. "World Drug Report 2016", *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28; "France: Country Drug Report", European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2017, www.emcdda.europa.eu.

there: comprehensive (socio-)economic development as the only *long-term alternative to the Afghan opium economy*; security, increasingly understood as *stabilization through negotiated peace*. More specifically, this boils down to three areas: socio-economic development, drug control, and peace and conflict issues.

- *Economic development and aid.* Even as European assistance to Afghanistan is determined more by individual European states than by the EU, Europe as a whole has emerged as *the largest development cooperation partner for Afghanistan*.
 - European development initiatives on Afghan rural and agricultural development (in which the EU invested half a bln EUR in aid since 2001) are particularly in line with Russia's interests.⁷⁸
 - Modest expansion of the EU states' investment in integrated water management and sustainable/hydropower energy in the Afghanistan-Central Asia context is an area closest to where Europe and Russia can cooperate, including in the private business sphere. As of May 2017, two European companies (from Italy and France) were engaged in the Rogun dam construction project that, despite all past hurdles, mostly related to a water dispute between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, is set to go ahead.⁷⁹ Russia's most ambitious development initiative so far, a 2014 plan for comprehensive development in Afghanistan, pointed out that Afghanistan's industrial development, including resource extraction projects (funded by China, India and others), requires more water and energy than Afghanistan possesses, and called for investment in a series of hydro-electric power stations in the north, also involving Central Asian states.⁸⁰ Russia remains interested in contributing to and implementing such projects, but only if international, including Western, cooperation and investment is secured.
 - Improving Afghanistan's potential for legal exports (in line with the Everything But Arms (EBA) regime that Afghanistan receives under the EU Generalized Scheme of Preferences as a Least

78. EU-Afghanistan Relations Factsheet, *op. cit.*

79. V. Panfilova, "Brussels zainteresovala stroitel'stvom Rogunskoj GES" [Brussels got interested in the Rogun dam construction], *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 18 May 2017, www.ng.ru.

80. The plan had been prepared for the 2014 G8 summit in Sochi that was cancelled (along with Russia's G8 membership) over sharp disagreements on Ukraine. "A New Generation of Alternative Development Programs for Elimination of Drug Production in Afghanistan", Russian Institute for Demography, Migration and Regional Development and Belarusian Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, 2014, <http://idmrr.ru>.

Developed Country) is one way to contribute to reducing Afghanistan's dependence on the opium economy. However, the lack of interest in improving Afghanistan's regional economic integration and connectivity (a "non-focal area" of EU support) raises questions, particularly in view of the EU's several-times-larger aid investment in "intra-regional cooperation" in Central Asia⁸¹ (which could be interpreted as a way to promote schemes alternative to the Eurasian Union dominated by Russia and Kazakhstan).

- *Drug control and counternarcotics.*⁸² While EU support for UNODC regional counternarcotics programs and half a bln EUR in support for policy and justice reform in Afghanistan allocated since 2001 are welcome initiatives,⁸³ Moscow is more suspicious about Western, including European, counternarcotics and security support for Central Asian states, unless these consist of broader multilateral initiatives that also involve Russia, such as the UNODC-affiliated Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre. Also, an area where the EU can have a positive impact is improved coordination between its two separate border security assistance programs on either side of the Afghan border with Central Asian states: BOMCA (Border Management Program in Central Asia) and BOMNAF (Border Management Northern Afghanistan).⁸⁴ But this is unlikely, due to the Tajik-Afghan tensions over border control issues and the EU's own dissociated aid strategies for Afghanistan and Central Asia. Another issue of special interest to Russia concerns the flows of precursors illegally imported *to Afghanistan*, and may suggest an upgrade of relevant policing activities *inside the EU*. The Russian MFA has officially noted that Italy, France and the Netherlands are among the main precursor suppliers to Afghanistan.⁸⁵ Should the EU be ready to toughen control over the outflows of illegal precursors, this area could have the highest potential to reactivate dialogue and build trust on drug-control issues in the EU-Russia context.

81. M. Laruelle, S. Peyrouse, V. Axyonova, "The Afghanistan-Central Asia Relationship: What Role for the EU?", FRIDE/EUCAM, *Working Paper*, No. 13, February 2013, p. 13, <http://fride.org>.

82. See also subsection 5.3 "Recommendations for cooperation or parallel actions".

83. EU-Afghanistan Relations Factsheet, *op. cit.*

84. M. Laruelle *et al.*, "The Afghanistan-Central Asia Relationship: What Role for the EU?", *op.cit.*, p. 14.

85. "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the Drug Situation in Afghanistan", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 18 August 2017, www.mid.ru.

- *Peace and conflict track.* On the one hand, the EU's firm commitment to a political process towards lasting peace and reconciliation—in view of the US remilitarized approach under Trump—provides grounds for EU-Russia dialogue. On the other hand, the UK, as the most active European power that has access to both government and the Taliban, and which effectively mediated between Afghanistan and Pakistan, is the European state with the worst bilateral relations with Russia. In contrast, in the post-2014 context, France and Germany have shown little interest in taking a more active role in the peace efforts on Afghanistan⁸⁶—certainly less interest than Russia has displayed since 2016. While this may lower the chance for mutual consultations on the peace process, it also puts the EU framework, rather than bilateral tracks, at the center for any such consultations in the Europe-Russia context. Both Russia and the EU are secondary actors on Afghanistan and both maintain a distance from the military aspects of the conflict, while both also have concerns about the problem and display genuine interest in a political solution.

86. Back in December 2012, the Paris-based *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique*, with the support of the French government, hosted informal intra-Afghan consultations in Chantilly, with the participation of High Peace Council members, supporters of the Karzai government, representatives of the “political opposition” (mainly various former Northern Alliance groupings), and some of the ex- and current Taliban-affiliated figures.

Conclusion

Russia's legitimate strategic interests in a broader region around Afghanistan are primarily centered on retaining its role and influence in Central Asia and on preventing any serious destabilization there. Russia's foreign and security policy decision-making on Afghanistan is guided by a high degree of pragmatism, rather than by hysteric alarmism. According to this pragmatic approach, so far, Afghanistan is not the main source of direct terrorist threats to Russia. This does not imply that no security threats emanate from Afghanistan for Russia's allies, partners and neighbors in Central Asia. While at present these risks are not very high, in the coming years they may increase, especially if and as some "foreign fighters", originating in this region, return from Syria and Iraq and concentrate in northern Afghanistan where they could join forces with local militants, many of whom are exiles from Central Asian states.

This keeps the task of preventing a potential spillover of instability and violent extremism from Afghanistan into Central Asia one of Russia's two security priorities regarding Afghanistan (the other being reduction of narcotics trafficking and of the Afghan opium economy). Russia's main strategy to address this task is to step up security cooperation with its CSTO allies in the region (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) and to support the stability of Afghanistan's two large Central Asian neighbors, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, through diplomatic, economic and other tools, mainly at the bilateral level, but also through trying to engage them, in some form, in regional multilateral frameworks.

Russia will continue to combine its measured security activity in Central Asia with retaining a distance from the armed conflict in Afghanistan. The main rationale for keeping such distance is to avoid the risk of any direct Russian engagement in the Afghan conflict, and ensure that others do not drag Russia into the Afghan problem (including by manipulating the threat of transnational terrorism in Afghanistan against Russia's interests) more than is merited by its interests in Central Asia. No matter how some stakeholders, particularly in the United States, try to hype and misrepresent Russia's limited contacts with the Taliban, Moscow has learnt its lessons in Afghanistan well enough. Maintaining a distance, however, enables and even requires Russia not only to provide military-technical support to the Afghan government (arms, military equipment, munitions deliveries and training), but also to contribute, within its

capacity, to regional and international efforts to achieve an Afghan peace settlement.

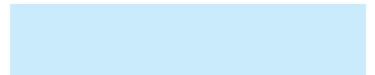
Stabilization in Afghanistan requires a combination of two pillars. The first pillar is an intra-Afghan political settlement that involves the Taliban, in one form or another, and takes account of some of the legitimate interests of regional neighbors. The second pillar implies more active and consolidated international efforts against explicitly transnationalized violent extremism (ISIS and more localized jihadist elements, such as the Haqqani network). Progress on the first track will require input from all regional actors, as well as the United States (if and once they are genuinely ready to pursue it) and other extra-regional powers, including Russia, not to mention the key Afghan parties. On the second track, the United States will remain the main extra-regional actor for the foreseeable future. This is not in conflict, but in line with Russia's interests. Even the expanded US presence does not stand a chance of defeating, or significantly hurting, the Taliban militarily, but it can still help contain the insurgency and ultimately make a mutually damaging stalemate—an essential condition for any progress on a peace track—a closer prospect than it is now.

At the end of the day, even shared threats and converging approaches cannot ensure cooperation—unless either the overall climate in Russia's relations with the West improves, or Moscow's Western counterparts manage to insulate policies related to Afghanistan from conflicts they have with Russia on other matters.

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