



MAKING SENSE OF RUSSIA'S POLICY IN AFGHANISTAN

Stephen BLANK

Younkyoo KIM

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Ifri

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15—FRANCE

Tel.: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00—Fax: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: accueil@ifri.org

Website: ifri.org

Authors

Stephen Blank has been a Senior Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington since 2013. He is an expert on Russian foreign and defense policies and international relations across the former Soviet Union, as well as on European and Asian security, including energy issues. From 1989-2013 he was a Professor of Russian National Security Studies at the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College in Pennsylvania. Dr. Blank has been Professor of National Security Affairs at the Strategic Studies Institute since 1989. In 1998-2001 he was Douglas MacArthur Professor of Research at the War College. Dr. Blank has published over 1100 articles and monographs on Soviet/Russian, US, Asian, and European military and foreign policies, including publishing or editing 15 books, testified frequently before Congress on Russia, China, and Central Asia for business, government, and professional think tanks here and abroad on these issues.

Younkyoo Kim is Professor in the Division of International Studies and Director of the Center for Energy Governance & Security at Hanyang University, Seoul. He has published widely on international energy politics and political/economic problems of resource-rich countries. He is the author and co-author of over 50 scholarly articles and monographs, and author or editor of 4 books.

Abstract

For some time, Western sources have been accusing Moscow of backing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. However, little effort has been done to analyze the modalities of this support and the way it relates to Moscow's overall policies and objectives in Central and Southern Asia. This essay sets out to explain both the trend in Russia's policies towards Afghanistan between 2013 and 2017, and the reasons underneath them. It explores Russia's actions vis-à-vis contending forces in Afghanistan and Central Asia in the broader context of Moscow's rapprochement with Pakistan, its ties to India and China and overall anti-Americanism that has grown exponentially since 2014. We argue that this approach would provide a better understanding of Russia's policies and objectives in Afghanistan.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	9
THE LARGER FRAMEWORK OF RUSSIAN ACTIVITIES AND POLICIES IN AFGHANISTAN	11
RUSSIAN POLICY	15
The evolution of Moscow’s approach to Afghanistan	15
Russian vision on US policy in Afghanistan	16
Russia-Central Asia relations and their joint stance on Afghanistan.....	19
Russia’s vehicles for military influence.....	22
THE PAKISTANI AND CHINESE CONNECTION	29
ASSESSING RUSSIA’S GOALS.....	35
CONCLUSIONS	37

Introduction

After extensive deliberation over its course of action in Afghanistan in 2017 the Trump Administration sent more troops with enhanced rules of engagement to Afghanistan. Undoubtedly the new strategy will mark an eventful change in the past strategy that is deemed to have failed. But for a new strategy to be maximally effective it must take into account all the relevant political, military, and other factors that pertain to the war in Afghanistan e.g. the nature of Russian activities and objectives in Afghanistan. In fact, there is almost no existing analysis of Russia's activities in regard to Afghanistan, let alone its objectives. The most recent answer that Moscow is providing assistance to the Taliban because it wants to displace Pakistan as the main foreign power in Afghanistan is not persuasive and fails to take into account the wider picture.¹ It is quite unlikely that Moscow thinks it can or should displace Pakistan here on an issue that is of the utmost importance to the Pakistani military-political elite and still be making overtures to Pakistan as Russia is now doing. Indeed, for Pakistan a friendly, i.e. pro-Pakistani regime in Kabul is a vital interest, just as a pro-Indian government in Kabul is a vital interest for Pakistan's rival, India.²

Clearly other answers and considerations than simply displacing Pakistan apply here. In fact, Russian policy coincides with a decided and visible turn towards rapprochement with Pakistan since 2013. Indeed, for the first time Russia and Pakistan recently concluded joint maneuvers in the North Caucasus, a sure sign of growing common interests.³ Furthermore, Pakistan has approved Russia's request to use the strategic Gwadar port for trade and access to the Indian Ocean.⁴ This rapprochement would not be possible or reciprocated if Pakistan believed Moscow was trying to move it out of the Afghan picture. Moreover, this Russo-Pakistani rapprochement suggests where we should look for answers to the questions of what Moscow is doing in Afghanistan and why. And this rapprochement with Pakistan is in itself a relatively new development whose roots and purposes must be

1. S. Ramani, "Understanding the Russia-Taliban Connection", *The Diplomat*, 4 August 2017, <https://thediplomat.com>.

2. Author's conversations with U.S. officials from USCENTCOM and the Department of Defense, March 2017.

3. "Russian, Pakistani Forces Launch Joint Exercise In North Caucasus", Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 25 September 2017, www.rferl.org.

4. "Pakistan Approves Russia's Request to Use Strategic Gwadar Port", *The Hindu*, 1 December 2016, www.thehindu.com.

accounted for. Therefore, if we are to understand Russian actions and goals in Afghanistan we must take into account not only those activities, but also Russian interests and policies in Central and South Asia and its overall relationship with China and Iran, all of whom are involved with Russia here. Indeed, not only Pakistan, but also China and Iran clearly seem to be supporting Russia or collaborating with its actions to date in regard to Afghanistan.⁵ For these reasons any assessment of Russian policies must comprise a wider field of relationships than a mere analysis of bilateral Russo-Afghan relations.

5. C. Gall, "In Afghanistan, U.S. Exits, and Iran Comes In", *The New York Times*, 6 August 2017, www.nytimes.com; A. Gul, "China, Pakistan, Russia to Meet on Afghanistan, Angering Kabul Leaders", *Voice of America*, 26 December 2016, www.voanews.com.

The Larger Framework of Russian Activities and Policies in Afghanistan

Russia's enhanced activities since 2012-13 in Afghanistan provides a key piece of the puzzle because it is already well known that it is supporting the Taliban and supplying them with weapons as cited below.⁶ But to grasp Moscow's activities in their totality the larger point that must be understood is that the war in Afghanistan is no longer merely about terrorism. Rather the war in Afghanistan has morphed beyond being primarily the theater of the US global war on terrorism or a US-Taliban war into being a proxy war that not only involves the US and the Taliban but also key powers and neighbors such as India, Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia as much as it is a counter-terrorist operation. As one recent assessment observes,

“The war in Afghanistan is best viewed on three levels: a war among Afghans, with the Taliban seeking to regain control of the entire nation; a contest for influence among regional powers such as India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia; and an international fight led by the United States against terrorists whose sanctuary depends on the first two conflicts.”⁷

Indeed, for Pakistan, if not India, ensuring a favorable standing among any Afghan regime has become a vital interest, one that has led the Pakistani government and armed forces to support the Taliban and other terrorist groups like the Haqqani network in support of a thoroughly conceived anti-Indian, if not anti-American, strategy.⁸ Therefore whatever happens in Afghanistan has repercussions in both South and Central Asia as well as in international relations and security as a whole. While much journalism in the last few years has grasped that Pakistan sees the present Afghani government as an Indian proxy against whom it is waging war by supporting terrorists in both India and Afghanistan, Russia's rapprochement with Pakistan since 2013 and current support for the Taliban show that it too is

6. T. Gibbons-Neff, “Russia Is Sending Weapons to Taliban, Top U.S. General Confirms”, *The Washington Post*, 24 April 2017, www.washingtonpost.com; “Russia Supports the Taliban”, Warsaw Institute, 24 March 2017, warsawinstitute.org.

7. V. J. Singh, “Why Peace Talks Are Washington's Best Bet in Afghanistan”, *Foreign Affairs*, 21 March 2018, www.foreignaffairs.com.

8. A. Gul, “China, Pakistan, Russia to Meet on Afghanistan, Angering Kabul Leaders”, *op. cit.*

using the Taliban and Afghanistan as a theater for an anti-American proxy war.

The US/NATO Commander in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson (USA) has observed, that Russia claims the Taliban are the ones fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in order to lend the Taliban legitimacy, undermine the Afghan government and NATO's effort to bolster it and its army.⁹ More recently he has pointed to Russia's arming the Taliban over the last 18-24 months through its base in Tajikistan coinciding with Moscow's operations in Syria.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Iran too is evidently collaborating with Russia against US objectives.¹¹ And that collaboration may be growing as recent Irano-Russian contacts suggest.¹² This is particularly evident in the energy sphere where Russia and Iran are negotiating several new major energy deals.¹³ Furthermore, Beijing stands behind Moscow, Islamabad, and Tehran and provides political support for Russian and Iranian policies and immense economic assistance to Pakistan, e.g. the \$46 Billion pledged to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).¹⁴ Meanwhile Moscow is apparently staffing its embassy in Kabul with former Soviet officials, holding talks in Moscow and Tajikistan with Taliban officials, removing certain of the Taliban's figures from official sanctions lists, and providing weapons that helped the Taliban overrun Kunduz in 2016. While Moscow and Tehran may be hedging against an ISIS victory in Afghanistan, Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan, Alexander Mantytsky defends these actions as being necessary to ensure the security of its embassy, consulates, and of Central Asia.¹⁵ Thus two key facts of Russian policy here are its effort to coordinate with Iran and China as well as Pakistan against the US And all those elements go into Russia's Afghanistan policy.

In other words, one of the novel features of Russian policy is this coordination with Iran in both Syria and Afghanistan, suggesting a broader Irano-Russian partnership across the Middle East for all the differences between them. Likewise, coordination with China in Central Asia is not new

9. "Russia and Iran's Ties With Taliban Stoke Fears Of Proxy War In Afghanistan", BusinessDay, www.businesslive.co.za, 29 December 2016.

10. J. Rowlett, "Russia 'Arming the Afghan Taliban', Says US", BBC, 24 March 2018, www.bbc.com.

11. *Ibid*; C. Gall, "In Afghanistan, U.S. Exits, and Iran Comes In", *op. cit.*

12. S. Kranish, "Iran and Russia To Enhance Military Ties After New US Sanctions," *Jerusalem Post*, 6 August 2017, www.jpost.com; "Iran and Russia Upgrade Cooperation", *Operational Environment Watch*, May 2017, p. 9.

13. "Caspian Energy Insight, March 16, 2018", Caspian Policy Center, 16 March 2018, www.caspianpolicy.org.

14. A. Gul, "China, Pakistan, Russia to Meet on Afghanistan, Angering Kabul Leaders", *op. cit.* For information about CPEC see www.cpecinfo.com.

15. "Russia and Iran's Ties with Taliban Stoke Fears of Proxy War in Afghanistan", *op. cit.*

but it certainly is new in South Asia where for years India was Moscow's preferred partner and Pakistan was a state suspected for complicity with terrorists and a nuclear proliferator.¹⁶ These new partnerships highlight the fact that Russia, for all its expansive ambitions to great power status globally cannot sustain a purely unilateral policy in South and Central Asia. It must align itself with like-minded partners and find ways to smooth over any differences between them as in the case of apparent Irano-Russian differences and a long history of mutual suspicion.¹⁷

Consequently, anti-Americanism, despite its prominence in Russian foreign and defense policy, is not the only motive for Russia's activities and policy here. The rapprochement with Pakistan and support for the Taliban are bound up with Russian objectives in both Central and South Asia, Russian ties to Iran, and Russian relations with China. Thus a fuller grasp of Russian policy and goals not only helps clarify the Afghan situation and the larger context in which that war is currently being fought, it also helps explain why and how Russia is now obstructing US efforts, what it hopes to gain, and exposes in greater depth the connections to both Central and South Asian regional security, the links between them, and the dangers to be faced in both arenas. It will also clarify to what degree the partnership, if not alliance, between Russia and China extends into South and Central Asia and what kinds of military-political collaboration are embodied within it.

16. A. Arbatov, "Terms of Engagement: WMD Proliferation and US-Russian Relations", in: S. J. Blank, Ed., *Prospects for US-Russian Security Cooperation*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2009, pp. 147-149.

17. J. W. Parker, *Persian Dreams: Moscow and Tehran Since the Fall of the Shah*, Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009.

Russian Policy

The evolution of Moscow's approach to Afghanistan

Russia's position regarding Afghanistan and Central Asia was already taking shape by 2011, despite the previous establishment of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) through Russia to Afghanistan. Already by 2011 Russian Ambassador Zabulov, saw the situation there as deteriorating from day to day.¹⁸ Russia's Presidential Representative in Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, told a press conference in May 2011 that the Afghanistan situation is constantly degrading.¹⁹ Moreover, Moscow had already long since loudly objected to any US military presence in Central Asia beyond Afghanistan because it aims to consolidate its position as unchallenged security manager of an exclusive sphere of influence in Central Asia. Therefore, foreign bases are unacceptable. In 2003, Russian Ambassador to India, Vyacheslav Trubnikov, stated that the US bases in Central Asia were redundant since Russia played the major stabilizing role there. Their only utility was in contributing to the anti-terror campaign in Afghanistan therefore should be terminated once that role ends.²⁰ Thus at that time Moscow remained torn between desiring to see a US presence to stabilize Afghanistan, wanting to see the US leave, and fears of threats to Afghanistan and Central Asia if the US' departure led to a Taliban victory.

Since then, of course Russo-American relations have declined to the point where Russian spokesmen say they could not be worse.²¹ A flood of Russian statements say that America is striving to uphold a dominant position in a fast disappearing or already obsolete old world order, thereby denying Russia's ascent to global great power status, that Washington is supporting movements aiming to undermine Russian statehood, that it intervenes forcefully in Middle Eastern countries (including Afghanistan) without any idea how to achieve a positive outcome and therefore makes bad

18. Moscow, *Interfax-AVN Online*, in English, 26 May 2011, retrieved from Open Source Center, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Central Eurasia (henceforth FBIS SOV); A. Avramov, "Fiasco-NATO's New Musical", *Duma*, in Bulgarian, 1 February 2012, retrieved from *FBIS SOV*.

19. Ibid.

20. E. Wishnick, *Strategic Consequences of the Iraq War: U.S. Security Interests in Central Asia Reassessed*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2004, p. 21.

21. "Russia Says Ties With US 'Could Not Get Any Worse' Under Tillerson Replacement", SBS News, 14 March 2018, www.sbs.com.au.

situations worse. Many commentators talk about a new Cold War and it is quite clear that anti-Americanism at home and abroad has long been a major if not the major driver of Russian foreign policy. For example, Ambassador extraordinaire and former deputy foreign minister Nikolai Spassky wrote that “There is no greater joy for a Russian intellectual than to speculate about a decline of America.”²² He is not alone in that sentiment.²³

One enduring charge is that the US seeks to encircle Russia militarily.²⁴ And US policy in Afghanistan unfortunately strengthened that perception, especially as the policy was mediated through a policy process that is predisposed to give worst-case scenarios for US policies and remains uncontrolled by civilian and domestic institutions not to mention legal ones.²⁵

Russian vision on US policy in Afghanistan

In this context repeated gambits by factions within the Obama Administration or the entire administration for bases in Afghanistan and possibly Central Asia after 2012 sent up red flags in Russia even as Moscow at the same time fully understood that American forces were supposed to leave Afghanistan by 2014.²⁶ Not only did Russia see the US move for bases as a threat to Russian security interests, its officials also publicly decried what they believed to be Washington's mistake of leaving too soon and in too much haste thereby leaving Russia with what it believed was a major threat to it and its Central Asian “clients.”²⁷ Given Moscow's default option of a worst-case assessment the paradoxical facts that the US was reducing forces

22. N. Spassky, “The Island of Russia”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 2, 2011, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru>.

23. F. Lukianov, “Karta politicheskogo bezdorozh'ia » [Political no-road map], *Gazeta.ru*, 3 April 2008, www.gazeta.ru; M. Tsytkin, “Russian Politics, Policy-Making and American Missile Defence”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 4, July 2009, pp. 784-87. Tsytkin cites analogous examples of this: V. Shlapentokh, “The Puzzle of Russian Anti-Americanism: From ‘Below’ or from ‘Above’”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 5, July 2011, pp. 873-89.

24. P. Bernstein and D. Ball, “Putin's Russia and U.S. Defense Strategy”, Center for Global Security and Research, National Defense University, 2015, <https://cgsr.llnl.gov>.

25. P. Felgenhauer, “Russia's Imperial General Staff”, *Perspective*, Vol. 16, No. 1, October-November, 2005, www.bu.edu.

26. M. Mazetti and E. Schmidt, “As It Fights ISIS, Pentagon Seeks String of Bases Overseas”, *The New York Times*, 11 December 2015, www.nytimes.com; K. Dilanian and D.S. Cloud, “U.S. Seeks New Bases For Drones Targeting Al-Qaeda In Pakistan”, *The Los Angeles Times*, 16 February 2014, www.latimes.com; J. Mankoff, “Why Russia Is Returning to Afghanistan”, 28 February 2017, www.worldpoliticsreview.com; R. Weitz, “Moscow's Afghan Endgame”, *The Diplomat*, 24 June 2014, www.thediplomat.com; V. Odintsov, “Can Washington Get a New Military Base in Central Asia?”, *New Eastern Outlook*, 30 September 2015; “US Considering New Drone Bases in Central Asia”, RT, 17 February 2014, www.rt.com.

27. R. Weitz, “Moscow's Afghan Endgame”, *op. cit.*

in Afghanistan and clearly not doing well there only abetted the belief in a nefarious design to preserve bases from which to threaten Russia and its supposed Central Asian clients. That conclusion further galvanized Moscow's decision to open talks with the Taliban against the prospect of their victory or that in Afghanistan of ISIS, which emerged as a force by 2013.

As the Arab Spring had just begun Moscow's fears for the stability of Central Asia ratcheted up sharply. Thus on April 13, 2011 Russia's anxiety about the possibility of the Arab revolutions spreading to Central Asia was the topic of a public discussion in the *Duma*. *Duma* members and Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin urged these states to make timely reforms from above lest they be swept away like those in North Africa. Since Russia's goals are stability, without which these states cannot draw closer to Russia, Karasin recommended the formation from above of a civil society, international and inter-religious peace, responsibility of leaders for the standard of living of the population, the development of education and work with youth.²⁸ In other words, Karasin called on Central Asian leaders to emulate Moscow's own efforts to build a "Potemkin democracy." President Medvedev at the time not only saw the Arab Spring as part of a scenario hatched from outside to threaten Russia and its Muslim friends and neighbors, he also told Uzbek President Islam Karimov that those events required even closer synchronization between Moscow and Central Asia on all issues.²⁹

These statements clearly apply to the US and Europe as Russian officials regularly claim that the US had and still has a conscious plan that it has implemented to promote revolutions to democratize Central Asia.³⁰ But while this is certainly not nor has it ever been the case in Central Asia, the preponderance of evidence clearly points to Russia as the instigator of the Kyrgyz revolution in 2010.³¹

By 2013 not only had Russo-American relations begun to deteriorate, Russia's rapprochement with Pakistan had also begun to accelerate, and Russian views about Afghanistan became still gloomier. The threat assessment held then by Russia and most Central Asian states, except

28. "Sokhranit' stabilnost' v Tsentral'noi Azii—uchastniki parlamentnarskikh situatsii v Gosdume" [Preserving stability in Central Asia—participants in parliamentary hearings in the State Duma], Russian State Duma, 13 April 2011, www.duma.gov.ru.

29. *Ibid*; B. Panier, "Medvedev to Karimov—Leave Office Voluntarily", Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 15 June 2011, www.rferl.org; R. Orange, "Uzbek President Accuses the West of Funding Arab Revolts", *The Telegraph*, 10 May 2011, www.telegraph.co.uk.

30. S. Nikolaev, "Central Asia in Geopolitics: the American Vector", *International Affairs* (Moscow), No. 2, 2011, pp. 57-62, www.eastviewpress.com.

31. S. Blank, "Moscow's Fingerprints in Kyrgyzstan's Storm", *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 14 April 2010, <http://cacianalyst.org>.

possibly Kazakhstan, had become that the prognosis for Afghanistan after the end of the Hamid Karzai regime was highly unstable and imminently dangerous.³² This assessment has continued into the present. For example, at the end of 2014, Moscow flatly labeled NATO policy as a failure.³³ Indeed, by 2013 if not earlier, Russia's ambassador to Afghanistan, Andrei Avetisyan, was warning that NATO was repeating the mistake of the 1990s abandoning Afghanistan in the middle of the war against terrorism and that this would have predictably tragic results.³⁴ Avetisyan's remarks reflected and summed up a series of other pessimistic Russian opinions.³⁵

Similarly Avetisyan repeatedly and publicly stated that the Afghan armed forces are not ready to replace NATO.³⁶ A Foreign Affairs Ministry official writing in the ministry's journal *International Affairs*, openly stated not only his own belief that the Taliban would sooner or later take over Afghanistan, but also that unnamed US intelligence reports concurred that the Afghan government is incapable of ruling the country and would steadily lose influence until it is confined to separate cities.³⁷ It was also at this time that key Russian leaders began inveighing that the greatest threat to Russia was ISIS whom they saw rising in Afghanistan. And they even considered open cooperation with other actors against it, possibly hinting at its future support for the Taliban and Pakistan.³⁸ This is also about when Moscow opened contacts with the Taliban whom it clearly regards as the lesser evil, presumably due to its mounting fears about Afghanistan and Central Asia's future.³⁹

32. "Voennaia doktrina Rossijskoi Federatsii" [Russian doctrine of the Russian Federation], President of Russia, 26 December 2014, <http://kremlin.ru>; and J. Kucera, "Kremlin Talks UP ISIS Threat to Central Asia, Russia", Eurasia Insight, 6 January 2015, <https://eurasianet.org>.

33. *Pajhwok Afghan News*, in English, 31 December 2014, retrieved from FBIS SOV.

34. *TOL News Online*, in English, 13 September 2013, retrieved from FBIS SOV.

35. F. Lukyanov, "Russia-2011: Regional Conflicts in Focus", *Moscow Defense Brief*, No. 3, 2011, p. 3; "CSTO Warns of Afghan Fallout Post-2014", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 28 February 2013; "NATO Pullout From Afghanistan to Change Central Asian Strategic Configuration, CIS ATC", Interfax, cited in Johnson's Russia List, 12 February 2013, <http://russialist.org>; Z. Kabulov, "Leaving Afghanistan, the United States Wants to Strengthen Their Presence in [the] Asia Pacific", *Security Index*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2013, pp. 5-9.

36. Interview with Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan: "Andreï Avetisyan: 'Les forces afghanes ne sont pas prêtes à remplacer l'OTAN'" [Andrey Avetisyan: "Afghan forces are not ready to replace NATO"], *Le Monde*, 3 July 2012, www.lemonde.fr.

37. V. Sergeev, "The USA in Afghanistan," *International Affairs* (Moscow), No. 3, 2012, pp. 58-66.

38. "Putin Considers Throwing Russia Into ISIS Fight: Report", NBC News, 22 September 2014, www.nbcnews.com.

39. A. Roth, "Russia Is Sharing Information With the Taliban to Fight the Islamic State", *The Washington Post*, 23 December 2015, www.washingtonpost.com. S. Yousafzai, "A Taliban-Russia Team-Up Against ISIS?" *The Daily Beast*, 26 October 2015, www.thedailybeast.com.

Russia-Central Asia relations and their joint stance on Afghanistan

Since then this assessment has driven Russian and Central Asian thinking about security threats in Central Asia. For example, Zamir Kabulov, Moscow's Special Representative to the Russian President for Afghanistan, said that if Trump "decides to withdraw the contingent, then everything will collapse."⁴⁰ But while Russia "has a stake in Afghanistan", it also wants others as much as possible to defend that stake and its policies are shot through with ambivalence, as it was not prepared to send troops to Afghanistan or even to the border with Tajikistan.⁴¹ But since the 2014 invasion of Ukraine Moscow has now conducted exercises on a regular basis in Central Asia and is using the base in Tajikistan as its conduit to the Taliban with whom it has had contacts since 2007. This clearly reflects a change in policy after 2014. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that Russian and Tajik defense forces must be ready for any scenario, including the most negative one. Therefore it is essential to bolstering the combat potential of those forces and the 201-division base in Tajikistan.⁴²

Shoigu's argument reflected a heightened urgency in Moscow that its Central Asian bulwark against Islamism was in growing danger from the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. Kabulov was even more explicit. He openly raised the possibility of so called precautionary moves on the Russo-Kazakh border or the Caspian Sea or fighting the terrorists on the Amu Darya rather than on the Volga.⁴³ Such outcomes would be a major calamity for Russia because Central Asia and particularly Kazakhstan are seen in Moscow as the final bulwark against the threat of Islamic terrorism and Moscow clearly holds to a domino theory about the spread of terrorism in Central Asia should Afghanistan fall to ISIS so that if Afghanistan were to fall to ISIS the threat would immediately sweep into Central Asia.⁴⁴

Furthermore, according to Kabulov, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan then knew of and shared Russia's assessment of an imminent ISIS-led invasion of Central Asia even though many Western analysts consider that

40. J. Gurganus, "Russia's Afghanistan Strategy", *Foreign Affairs*, 2 January 2018, www.foreignaffairs.com.

41. *Interfax*, in English, 29 December 2014, retrieved from FBIS SOV; "Will never do anything detrimental to India's security: Russia", *Indian Express*, 8 December 2014, <http://indianexpress.com>.

42. *Interfax*, in English, 23 December 2014, retrieved from FBIS SOV.

43. J. Kucera, "Kremlin Talks UP ISIS Threat to Central Asia, Russia", *op. cit.*

44. P. Stronski, "Domestic Vulnerabilities and Threat Assessment", in L. Aron (Ed.), *To Have and to Hold: Putin's Quest for Control in the Former Soviet Empire*, Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2018, pp. 90-91.

assessments of ISIS' capabilities, especially in this theater, are overhyped.⁴⁵ Indeed, others stated that there is no way ISIS could threaten Russia and that this argument is merely a smokescreen to conceal the growing Russian cooperation with the Taliban due to its rivalry with Washington. Be that as it may, Uzbekistan President Karimov stated his belief that an ISIS-led invasion was imminent during President Putin's 2014 visit to Uzbekistan and Putin publicly shared them.⁴⁶ Tajikistan's President Rakhmonov had also become increasingly insistent about the approaching threat and Western analysts as well have seen the Taliban making inroads among the non-Pashtun peoples of Afghanistan, among them Uzbeks and Tajiks, as they advance towards the border with Central Asian states.⁴⁷ Likewise, Russia's General Staff also expected the Afghan situation to deteriorate once it was announced in 2014 that NATO and the US are leaving. Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov even warned Western attaches that Central Asia could come under threat due to NATO's withdrawal. Kabulov expected Islamists to grow in number and expand operations to if not beyond the borders with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in spring 2015.⁴⁸ Similarly Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that this US withdrawal necessitated maximal strengthening of security ties among Russia and Central Asian states.⁴⁹

While much of this assessment was clearly overdrawn, as there has been no collapse or invasion of Central Asia, these views, plus the exigencies of anti-Americanism, and Russia's regional ambitions drive Russian thinking about the war in Afghanistan. Thus Putin, at the December 2014 summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), openly warned the Russian and other armies there that they must prepare to take "preventive actions" in the light of a forthcoming threat to Central Asia from Afghanistan.

Shoigu also stated that Russian and Tajik defense forces must be ready for any scenario, including the most negative one. Therefore it is essential to bolstering the combat potential of those forces and the 201-st division base

45. J. Kucera, "Kremlin Talks UP ISIS Threat to Central Asia, Russia", *op. cit.*

46. *Interfax*, in English, 10 December 2014, retrieved from FBIS SOV.

47. C. Recknagel, "Militants in Afghanistan, Pakistan Claiming Allegiance to IS", *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 26 September 2014, www.rferl.org; "Central Asia and Afghanistan As the Drawdown Deadline Arrives," *Radio Free Europe /Radio Liberty*, 28 December 2014, www.rferl.org.

48. *Tass*, 10 December 2014, retrieved from FBIS SOV. "Russian Ambassador Warns of Afghan Problems Spilling Across Border", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 29 December 2014, www.rferl.org; *Interfax*, in English, 29 December 2014, retrieved from FBIS SOV.

49. R. Weitz, "Moscow's Afghan Endgame", *op. cit.*

in Tajikistan.⁵⁰ Such assessments continued through 2015.⁵¹ And since then Moscow has either pressured or been requested by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to open new bases or augment existing ones. Thus in 2017 in Tajikistan Moscow used the Iskander-M missiles in drills and is establishing an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) battalion there.⁵² In 2014-15 Kabulov was even more explicit. He openly raised the possibility of so called precautionary moves on the Russo-Kazakh border or the Caspian Sea or fighting the terrorists on the Amu Darya rather than on the Volga.⁵³ This would mark a fundamental departure from Russia's policy to date that really amounts to an attempt at deterrence and dissuasion of the terrorists but at the same time is more rhetorical than substantive.

However, it is not only concern about Afghanistan and the potential return of civil war that might spread into Central Asia or actually lead to an ISIS takeover that then exports terrorism and insurgency to Central Asia that drives Russian defense policy in Central Asia. In general Russia perceives Central Asia as a fragile region vulnerable to all kinds of threats and therefore an area that Russia must stabilize, if need be by itself or preferably with the local governments.⁵⁴ Furthermore Russia believes that it is obliged to undertake this stabilization for if it fails not only will terrorists or worse, Americans, make their presence felt in Central Asia, Russia will then have demonstrated its inability to play the part of a great power and pole in its vaunted multipolar world.⁵⁵ There is also an ever present perception in Russian and local governments' minds that there exists a substantial domestic underground of Islamic extremists in Central Asia or Jihadists who are waiting, regardless of trends in Afghanistan, to strike at local governments. While there is good reason to believe that this threat assessment of the imminent threat of Central Asian Islamic radicalism is substantially over-hyped; the fact of this perception and its staying power in official policy documents and mentalities helps drive Russia's perception that it must be ready to deploy rapidly into Central Asia or at least possess that capability if need be.⁵⁶

50. *Interfax*, in English, 23 December 2014, retrieved from FBIS SOV.

51. S. Shankhar, "ISIS Threat to Central Asia Has Increased, Russia's Intelligence Chief Warns: Report", *International Business Times*, 28 October 2015, 28 October 2015, www.ibtimes.com.

52. "Kyrgyz Leader Raps US Says Ready To Let In New Russian Base", *BBC Monitoring*, 24 July 2017; "Russian Iskander Missiles First Used In Drills In Tajikistan", *BBC Monitoring*, 1 June 2017; "Na rossijskoj voennoj baze v Tadjikistane sozdatut batal'on bespilotnikov" [Russian base in Tajikistan to set up UAV battalion this year], *Interfax-AVN*, 25 May 2017, www.interfax.ru.

53. J. Kucera, "Kremlin Talks UP ISIS Threat to Central Asia, Russia", *op. cit.*

54. B. Lo, "Frontiers New and Old Russia's Policy in Central Asia", *Ifri, Russie.Nei.Visions* No. 82, January 2015, pp. 11-13, www.ifri.org.

55. *Ibid.*

56. J. Heatherstraw and D.W. Montgomery, *The Myth of Post-Soviet Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics*. Research Paper, Chatham House, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2014.

Yet despite these warnings of doom and gloom Moscow, as noted above, still insisted that NATO bear primary responsibility for Afghanistan, thus reflecting its ambivalence since it also “finds it inexpedient to send border guards to reinforce the Tajik-Afghan border.”⁵⁷ Similarly Kabulov also reported that Russia would not send its troops into Afghanistan.⁵⁸

Russia's vehicles for military influence

Instead Moscow sought to strengthen its allies through the CSTO and military subsidies and enhance its presence inside Afghanistan by the use of all other available means of power at its disposal including searching for multilateral and bilateral partnerships even as it acts unilaterally to strengthen its forces in Central Asia.⁵⁹ There is no doubt that in the last several years that Russia has steadily built up an extensive superstructure of military presence in Central Asia. First, its improvement in military capability over the last decade opens up possibilities for deployment to Central Asia. Second, Moscow can now legally recruit foreigners, including Muslims and Central Asian residents who speak Russian, into the Russian Army to create a kind of “French Foreign Legion *à la Russe*” force that can and will fight in local theaters.⁶⁰ Third, there was even some discussion of the possibility of employing Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechen or other Muslim forces not only in the North Caucasus but in Central Asia as well. Indeed, Kadyrov announced his willingness to send Chechens to perform special military missions for Putin that other organizations of the Russian forces cannot perform, e.g. in Ukraine or as Putin's palace guard, or perhaps in Central Asia.⁶¹

Furthermore, and fourth, Russia has now decided that it is safe to draft North Caucasian soldiers in numbers that would supply the army with about 10,000 servicemen annually. And they could be sent to Central Asia if needed. Some Chechen forces have been sent to Ukraine and participated in operations during 2014. More recently Chechen forces have been used in

57. Moscow, *Interfax*, 29 December 2014, retrieved from FBIS SOV.

58. *Ibid.*

59. J. Nixey, “The Long Goodbye: Waning Russian Influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Royal Institute of International Affairs”, Chatham House, 1 June 2012, www.chathamhouse.org.

60. “Putin Signs Decree Allowing Foreigners into Russia's Army”, *The Moscow Times*, 7 January 2015, <https://themoscowtimes.com>.

61. “Kadyrov zaiavil o gotovnosti chechenskikh dobrovol'tsev vpolniat' prikazy prezidenta Rossii” [Kadyrov announced the readiness of Chechen volunteers to fulfill the orders of the Russian president], *Interfax*, 29 December 2014.

Syria and Libya.⁶² Indeed, several analysts argued that Russia should send North Caucasian troops who have gained experience fighting in Chechnya or throughout the region into Central Asia which might be expected—in case of future potential contingencies there due to terrorism and/or a collapse in Afghanistan—to feature a counterinsurgency operation or some would say hybrid wars resembling those in which Moscow has engaged since 1999.⁶³

Fifth, Russia is expanding its practice of exercises with local militaries; in 2015 it joined with Kazakh and Azeri naval personnel for joint exercises in the Caspian Sea.⁶⁴ More recently the Kyrgyz Army announced plans to set up a joint force with Russia.⁶⁵ Sixth, it is augmenting its own capabilities at its bases in Central Asia as well as in the Red Army by sending more and more attack fighter planes to its bases in Central Asia, clearly impressed by US tactics in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is adding hundreds of UAVs to its forces for both intelligence and potential strike missions. And as it augments its own capabilities it is also planning and conducting many more exercises a year than was previously the case.

Seventh Moscow possesses other vehicles for militarily influencing the situation in Central Asia such as the Collective rapid reaction force of the CSTO, its investments in defensive infrastructure in the region, its ability to subsidize local militaries with Russian weapons at cut-rate prices, military education programs for Central Asian officers and its links with local intelligence organizations.⁶⁶ Taken in their totality these instruments give Moscow numerous points of leverage in Central Asia particularly with regard to defense issues.

Thus Moscow's military responses through 2017 fell into the same categories as did its previous military policies in Central Asia, namely: expanding its own capabilities, enhancing cooperation among CSTO members by means of subsidizing them with Russian weapons, providing officer training, education, and security cooperation for police and border forces as well as military forces, bilateral deals to ensure a robust Russian

62. "Russia Has Leading Role to Play In Helping Resolve Libya Crisis Says Maetig", *Libya Herald*, 15 September 2017, www.libyaherald.com; M. Suchkov, "What's Chechnya Doing in Syria?", *Al-Monitor*, 26 March 2017, www.al-monitor.com.

63. V. Dzutsev, "Russia May use North Caucasus for Hybrid Warfare in Central Asian and European Conflicts", *Jamestown North Caucasus Weekly*, XV, No. 19, October 17, 2004, pp. 3-5; V. Dzutsati, "Russia May use North Caucasus for Hybrid Warfare in Central Asian and European Conflicts", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 11, No. 178, 8 October 2014, <https://jamestown.org>.

64. "Three Caspian States to Hold First Joint Naval Drills", *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 7 January 2015, www.rferl.org.

65. "Kyrgyz Army Plans to Set Up Joint Force with Russia", *AKI Press*, 10 March 2018, Retrieved from BBC Monitoring

66. S. Peyrouse, "Russia's Military Presence in Central Asia: Strategy, Capabilities and Threats", in: S. J. Blank (ed), *The Russian Military in Contemporary Perspective*, US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, forthcoming.

military presence in Central Asia, using the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'s Anti-Terror organization for police purposes against terrorists, joint anti-drug operations with Central Asians, and expanding cooperation with other interested governments who are engaged with Afghanistan or have a vital interest in its future course.

Because it is simultaneously engaging the Taliban and all the other interested parties to ensure that whatever happens it has a voice in Afghanistan, Moscow has enabled itself to use its contacts with all the parties to leverage their behavior just as it has done in the Middle East. Thus it is able to engage with both Kabul and the Taliban because it knows that Kabul cannot afford to spurn that Russian presence lest more support go to the Taliban. We see this form of “dual engagement” with regard to Russian investments in Afghanistan. Moscow has recently tried to increase its investment profile in Afghanistan.⁶⁷ This obviously aims to impart some stability to the Afghan regime, show Moscow's support for that regime, solidify an enduring Russian presence in Afghanistan, prepare for a post-American geopolitical competition for influence there, and establish linkages to key sectors and elites who would be willing to work with Russia once Washington and NATO depart. Such tactics perfectly epitomize the pattern cited above of playing both sides against the middle to enhance its leverage with all parties. In an effort to attract and presumably recruit Afghans to its side Moscow has also begun building a multi-million-dollar Russian cultural center in Kabul. In this respect, as reported by Frud Bezhan for Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty it is taking advantage of the fact that, Afghanistan is eager to bolster ties with major regional players like Russia and to obtain large foreign investments in construction and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan.⁶⁸ Thus Russia's efforts to establish a permanent presence within Afghanistan through the Ghani government are strengthened in its eyes by virtue of the fact that it can also influence Taliban behavior and thus threaten the regime if it refuses to accept Moscow's terms. And the same holds true for its relationship with the Taliban. This is a typical pattern and tactic of Russian foreign policy particularly in divided countries. We see it in Moldova and Transnistria and equally in Iraq where it plays both the Kurds and the Baghdad government against each other.⁶⁹ Indeed, in multi-ethnic or multi-confessional societies like Afghanistan, Moscow

67. F. Bezhan and H. Sawarood, “Russia Is Back In Afghanistan—With Millions In Investment”, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 11 December 2014, www.rferl.org.

68. F. Bezhan, “Restoring Its Legacy, Moscow Invests in Future in Afghanistan”, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 31 March 2014, www.rferl.org.

69. S. Blank, “Energy and Russia's High-Stakes Game in Iraq”, *EGS Working Paper 2015-2-1*, Center for Energy Governance and Security, Hanyang University, February 2015, www.egskorea.org.

habitually and relentlessly exploits these fissures to have supporters in each camp and leverage each group to act as it desires.

Such tactics lie at the heart of Russia's overall national security strategy where either non-military or military force is used to create new rules of the game Moscow does not respect accepted ideas of sovereignty or territorial integrity, seeing them as instrumentalized weapons-just like it sees terrorism (see below).⁷⁰ Instead, Moscow "instrumentalizes" "Gray area diplomacy", as an acute form of non-linear destabilization and not only in Ukraine or Georgia but in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere.

This examination of Russian military policy that has probably ruled out the return of Russian combat troops to Afghanistan reveals an ongoing pattern to leverage partnerships and alliances with all the interested parties in Afghanistan except for NATO since that is now obviously out of the question. Yet it will insist, as observed above, that NATO defends Afghanistan. Nevertheless, this policy means heightened military-political and military-economic engagement and deals with India, China, and Pakistan, and in the Chinese case an approach for what appears to be an open military alliance.

Furthermore, Moscow has long since come to believe that the US is actively inciting color revolutions across all of Asia and even was or still might be collaborating with terrorists against Russia's efforts to integrate and subordinate Central Asia economically and strategically to Russia. Therefore it needs to create instruments of power and policy by which it can thwart not just the terrorists but also the Americans.⁷¹ Thus Russia is drafting an agreement for future supplies of weapons to Afghanistan.⁷² Clearly its engagement seems to be broader than a merely military one.

Moscow has also brokered an arrangement by which India would buy Russian arms and equipment, e.g. light artillery and mortars that will then go to the Afghan army. Since neither side can or will inject its own forces into Afghanistan and India does not have the necessary spares and equipment this arrangement works well as away of satisfying the enormous

70. *Ibid*; J. Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad*, London: Chatham House, 2013, pp. 61-62; M. Boulegue, "The Russia-NATO Relationship Between a Rock and a Hard Place: How the 'Defensive Inferiority Syndrome' Is Increasing the Potential for Error", *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2017, p. 371.

71. On Russia's Interests see Col. R.P. Khatylev and Lt. Colonel D.P. Pyrikov, "Tsentral'no-aziatskij vektor voennoj politiki Rosssijskoi Federatsii", *Voennaia Mysl'*, No. 3, 2009, pp. 15-21; on the new threat perception see: *Interfax-AVN*, in Russian, November 27, 2014, *FBIS SOV*, November 27, 2014; I. Facon, "Moscow's Global Foreign and Security Strategy: Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Meet Russian Interests", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 2013, p. 463, <http://as.ucpress.edu>.

72. "Russia Draft Agreement on Afghan Arms Supplies", Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 29 December 2014, www.rferl.org.

needs of the Afghan army.⁷³ This arrangement also builds on the upsurge of Russian direct investment in Afghanistan.⁷⁴ This process thus enhances Moscow's standing in Kabul and continues to build on its long-term partnership with India that now embraces Central Asia as well as South Asia. It may also be the case though we cannot be certain that Moscow will look benevolently upon the efforts of India and Central Asian governments to strengthen military ties with each other. The expansion of such ties clearly ranks among major recent Indian policy initiatives. And it meets the needs of Central Asian states as well, especially if they are continuing to balance their major power relationships.⁷⁵

Yet at the same time Russia began in 2013 to establish intelligence sharing with and, according to several reports, subsequent arms transfers to the Taliban.⁷⁶ Concurrently it assessed a quagmire or defeat for NATO, grew its ties to Pakistan, began to hype the ISIS threat, and worsened its ties with the US. Kabulov, stated that “the Taliban interest objectively coincides with ours” in the fight against the Islamic State, which has captured broad swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq.⁷⁷ By 2015 it was reported that, in return for its help, Russia has supplied the Taliban with large caches of arms, claims Moscow has rebuffed. At the same time, the Taliban has formed and deployed a 1,000-member Special Forces detachment, arguably equipped with Russian-supplied intelligence, to fight ISIS. Time will tell whether Russia will boost its support to the Taliban still further.⁷⁸

Since then Russia has also shown increasing support for the Taliban as a prospective governing partner or even the nucleus of a future Afghanistan.⁷⁹ Indeed, Russia is now transferring weapons to the Taliban.⁸⁰ In addition, Russia is also advocating a new Afghan government to include the Taliban (who it assumes could be subject therefore to Russian leverage).

73. S. Miglani, “India Turns to Russia to Help Supply Arms to Afghan Army”, Reuters, 30 April 2014, www.reuters.com.

74. R. Weitz, “Russia-India Afghan Arms Deal Comes with Regional Implications,” *World Politics Review*, 6 May 2014, www.worldpoliticsreview.com.

75. N. Gokhale, “India’s Rising Regional Military Engagement”, *The Diplomat*, 10 February 2014, <https://thediplomat.com>; “Kazakhstan and India Develop Cooperation in Defense Sector”, *Kazhastanskaya Pravda*, 8 December 2014, www.kazpravda.kz.

76. S. Yousafzai, “A Taliban-Russia Team-Up Against ISIS?”, *The Daily Beast*, 26 October 2015, www.thedailybeast.com; N. Gutteridge, “Putin to team up with the Taliban To Wipe Out Islamic State—and Give Them Weapons”, *Express*, 26 October 2015, www.express.co.uk.

77. A. Roth, “Russia Is Sharing Information With the Taliban To Fight the Islamic State”, *The Washington Post*, 23 December 2015, www.washingtonpost.com; S. Yousafzai, “A Taliban-Russia Team-Up Against ISIS?”, *op. cit.*

78. J. Ahmad, “Russia and the Taliban Make Amends”, *Foreign Affairs*, 31 January 2016, www.foreignaffairs.com; N. Gutteridge, “Putin To Team Up With the Taliban To Wipe Out Islamic State—and Give Them Weapons”, *op. cit.*

79. *Ibid.*

80. T. Gibbons-Neff, “Russia Is Sending Weapons to Taliban, Top U.S. General Confirms”, *op. cit.*

And with Pakistan and China, Russia has urged an end to sanctions against the Taliban while also now supporting the Taliban's demand for the exit of all foreign troops (i.e., NATO and US forces) from Afghanistan—an outcome that will almost certainly lead to the Taliban's victory in a short time.⁸¹ Moscow pursues these improved ties with Pakistan and the Taliban despite Indian unhappiness although so far there has been no major rupture of Indo-Russian relations.⁸² At the same time Moscow is now trying to arrange a kind of peace conference regarding Afghanistan in Moscow with China, Pakistan, India, Iran, and, belatedly, Afghanistan while also promoting (along with Iran) the interests of the Taliban as part of any future government there.⁸³ These conferences in February and April 2017 also represented efforts to build a regional platform Central Asia. Therefore Moscow sent out invitations to Russia, China, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and the US who refused to attend.⁸⁴ Moreover, these meetings also clearly stood in opposition to the Kabul process as they attempted to project Russia's primacy as a peacemaker in Afghanistan as opposed to that of the US. Furthermore, these moves also signify the ongoing anti-American turn in Russian foreign policy and, given the support of China and Pakistan, these moves also challenged India's interests in Afghanistan.⁸⁵ Thus Russian support for China could materially affect its ties with India even as those relations worsen due to the Indo-Chinese crisis in the border areas around Tibet and over Chinese support for Pakistan.⁸⁶ Yet the absence of conferences since then suggests the failure of Moscow's efforts to get much international traction. One reason for this failure perhaps is the fact that this series of connections among Russia, China, India, and Pakistan can easily spread into Central Asia, and poison their mutual relations especially as all

81. "Russia, China, Pakistan Call For End To Sanctions Against Taliban", *TOLO News*, 8 December 2016, www.tolonews.com; B. Hayat and H. Hesam, "Russia Backs Taliban's Call for Withdrawal of Foreign Forces", *Ariana News*, 1 April 2017, <http://ariananews.af>; "Russia Says Trying To Push Afghan Taliban To Join National Reconciliation", *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 1 April 2017, www.rferl.org.

82. I. Bagcil, "Russia, China and Pakistan for Flexible Ties with Taliban, India Ignored", *The Times of India*, 29 December 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>; A. Rafiq, "Pakistan: Russia's New Best Friend?", *The National Interest*, 27 September 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org>.

83. A. Iqar Haroon, "Afghanistan Peace Conference in Moscow—A Strategy to hold Daesh at Amu Darya than on the Volga River", *Dispatch Newsdesk*, 27 March 2017, www.dnd.com.pk; "Russia Invites Iran to Attend Conference on Afghanistan", *Bakhtar News*, 2 April 2017, <http://bakhtarnews.com>.

84. "US Snubs 11-State Afghanistan Peace Conference, Says Russia Trying To 'Assert Influence'", *RT*, 14 April 2017, www.rt.com; A. Gul, "Russia to Host Wider Regional Conference on Afghanistan", *Voice of America*, 7 February 2017, www.voanews.com.

85. C. Fair, "Securing Indian Interests in Afghanistan Beyond 2014", *Asia Policy*, No. 17, 2014, pp. 27-32

86. N. A. Gokhale, "India's Uncompromising Stand against China in the Himalayas Is Backed up with Hard Power," *The Diplomat*, 31 July 2017, <https://thediplomat.com>.

of them are members of the SCO.⁸⁷ This could perhaps explain why in 2018 India and China agreed to undertake joint economic projects in Afghanistan, in a move that could upset Pakistan.⁸⁸ According to Indian commentator, Srikanth Kondapalli, the idea of a joint project in Afghanistan goes back to 2010. Neither is it a secret that China has to take Pakistan into account before moving on Afghanistan. Nevertheless Beijing evidently has not found that Pakistan has helped ensure its security with regard to Afghanistan's travails so it is trying this tack.⁸⁹

87. D. Grossman, "China Will Regret India's Entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *The Diplomat*, 24 July 2017, <https://thediplomat.com>.

88. K. J. M. Varma, "Wuhan Summit: India, China to Undertake Joint Economic Project in Afghanistan", *Live Mint*, 28 April 2018, www.livemint.com.

89. D. R. Chaudhury, "Modi, Xi Give Strategic Direction to Militaries; to Work on Joint Development Project in Afghanistan", *The Economic Times* (India), 28 April 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com>.

The Pakistani and Chinese Connection

The more intriguing question is why it acts this way, or what it is trying to achieve? To answer that question, we must examine Russian policy in a broader context than just Afghanistan and Central Asia. In particular Russia's concurrent rapprochement with Pakistan has to be assessed. These moves towards Afghanistan and Central Asia coincide with the rapprochement with Pakistan, and the growing effort to portray ISIS as the main threat to Russia that justifies inviting Russia into a grand international coalition against terrorism. Thus Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of Russia's Security Council, has recently stated (notably in Beijing) that, "The greatest threat to national security comes from a new generation of terrorists, uniting under the banners of ISIS."⁹⁰

While there is good reason for assuming that this relationship with Pakistan is to some degree connected with Russia's overall pivot to Asia and the ensuing enhancement of the Asian vector in Russian foreign policy as well as Russia's Afghanistan policy; one of the curious facts about this bilateral relationship is that due to the absence of analysis there is little or no public record indicating Moscow's motives over time for moving closer to Islamabad. Indeed, nobody writing about the pivot to Asia considers that it also comprises Russian policy in South Asia despite the major change in policy towards Pakistan. Four concurring and overlapping factors seem to be at work here though it is difficult to discern their particular importance. Nevertheless, they all more or less coincide with Putin's return to power in 2012, the opening of ties with the Taliban in 2013 and the ensuing strengthening of ties to China while Russo-American relations plummeted. First, Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 signified a reinvigoration of relations with China. Such an alignment was clearly a key point of his "election program". Putin memorably stated that Russia would "catch the Chinese wind in its sails" (an image that also entails subordination to China) and derided the China threat theory.⁹¹ Subsequently Putin also indicated that Russia and China would begin discussing a "Great Eurasia project",

90. "Patrushev Names Biggest Threat to Russia", Vestnik Kavkaza, 28 July 2017, <http://vestnikkavkaza.net>.

91. V. Putin, "Vladimir Putin on Foreign Policy: Russia and the Changing World", Valdai Discussion Club, 27 February 2012, <http://valdaiclub.com>.

which evidently comprises both China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).⁹² Presumably these talks are based upon China's earlier assent to the idea of linking Russia's plans for integrating Eurasia through the EEU to the OBOR project.⁹³ Given India's reserve about this newly titled Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and general rivalry with China along their mutual peripheries and Pakistan's centrality to China's grand design, a Sino-Russian alliance appears to be developing which implicitly works in favor of Pakistan and against Indian interests since in any such relationship China is the rider of the alliance and Russia the horse.⁹⁴

Since then, it has become clear that since 2014 if not earlier that Russia has become substantially more dependent upon Chinese economic and political support. Moscow has moved towards supporting China's position on key Asian issues like the Korean Six-Party talks, the South China Sea, and on joint resistance to the US-South Korea-Japan project of the Terminal High Altitude Terminal Air Defense (THAAD).⁹⁵ Given the cooling ties with India and the all-weather friendship of China and Pakistan as well as China's immense investment in Pakistan it is reasonable to suspect that Chinese diplomats have urged Russia and Pakistan to improve their ties and find a basis for a common fight against terrorists who threaten those regimes as well as China's, even if both Islamabad and Moscow are state sponsors of other terrorists.

Second, Russo-Pakistani relations may betray a Russian attempt to punish India for gravitating to the US during the coinciding tenures of Prime Minister Modi and President Obama. Despite the ongoing and large Indo-Russian arms relationship their economic relations have never seriously improved and India's increasing turn to the West is discernible everywhere, e.g. in its arms imports and in its security policies, e.g. its closer ties to Japan

92. "Plenary Session of St. Petersburg International Economic Forum", President of Russia, 17 June 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru>; "Interview to the Xinhua News Agency of China", President of Russia, 23 June 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

93. *Xinhua Asia-Pacific Service*, in Chinese, February 6, 2014, retrieved from *FBIS SOV*.

94. On Russia-China see S. Blank, "Russo-Japanese Relations From a Regional Perspective", *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2017, pp. 21-51; S. Blank, "Russia's Pivot To Asia: The Multilateral Dimension", National Bureau of Asian Research, 28 June 2017, www.nbr.org; on the BRI see Nadege Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century: Political and Strategic Implications Of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Seattle and Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Research, Asia, 2017; T. Miller, *China's Asian Dream*, London: Zed Books, 2017; on Sino-Indian rivalry see C. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry In the Indo-Pacific*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012.

95. S. Blank, "Russo-Japanese Relations From a Regional Perspective"; S. Blank, "Russian Writers on the Decline of Russia in the Far East and the Rise of China", 13 September 2016, www.jamestown.org, in S. Enders Wimbush and E.M. Portale (Eds), P.A. Goble Foreword, *Russia In Decline*, Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2017, pp. 255-290.

and Australia and cool relations with China.⁹⁶ Therefore, according to Russian analysts Russia evidently intended to show India that it has other cards to play and “punish it” for “straying” from Russia by improving relations with Pakistan, selling it weapons, and even selling China advanced weapons before it sold them to India, thereby reversing the traditional Russian practice.⁹⁷ At the same time, it has carefully calibrated this “punishment” to preserve the basis for amity with India. Nevertheless, the rapprochement with Pakistan moves forward and Russo-Indian ties, though strong, are nothing like what they were. Meanwhile the overall long-term trend of Indo-American relations is towards closer alignment.⁹⁸

Third, as noted above, Moscow clearly regards the Taliban as distinctly the lesser of two evils and apparently not as a potential threat either to Central Asia or the North Caucasus. That being the case, it thereby became necessary to open up and improve dialogue with Pakistan, the Taliban's sponsor, whom Moscow probably regards as possessing considerable leverage and influence over the Taliban if not other terrorist groups, excepting ISIS. Since then these ties have improved while Afghanistan's situation has not improved but visibly deteriorated. However, it could be that the decision to improve ties with Pakistan preceded and thus justified the decision to resume contacts with the Taliban. This, indeed, is one of the questions that needs to be more thoroughly investigated. If it is the tie to Pakistan that is driving the connections to the Taliban, that would justify a different set of US responses than if the Taliban tie was driving the rapprochement with Pakistan. Indeed, in December 2016 Russia convened discussions with Pakistan and China but not Afghanistan over a possible peace settlement in Afghanistan and those discussions have continued since then with Moscow convening a “peace conference”, offering to mediate between Kabul and the Taliban and urging a “government of national reconciliation to include the Taliban.

And whatever the actual sequence of Russian initiatives might be, Moscow is aiming to extract from both the Taliban and Pakistan guarantees that not only would Russia and Pakistan have guaranteed influence in a new government but also that the Taliban would then not support the use of Afghanistan as a base for the spread of terrorism into Central Asia and Russia and thus make Afghanistan (if that can be imagined) into a bulwark (with Pakistani support) against ISIS. At the same time, Moscow's intimacy

96. C. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*, *op. cit.*

97. S. Blank and E. Levitzky, “Geostrategic Aims of the Russian Arms Trade in East Asia and the Middle East”, *Defence Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2015, pp. 1-18.

98. H. Pant and Y. Joshi, “Indo-US Relations Under Modi: The Strategic Logic Underlying the Embrace,” Chatham House, *International Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 1, 2017, pp. 133-147, www.chathamhouse.org.

with Iran has also led both those governments to promote the Taliban as a less dangerous alternative to ISIS who has “usurped” the Taliban’s previous role as the leading Islamist insurgency in Afghanistan.⁹⁹

Understandably Kabul and Washington are furious with Moscow, but while Moscow may invite the Ghani government to participate in future meetings, the Taliban and Pakistan are clearly basking in the light of being recognized as a player in the resolution of the Afghan conflict that has gone on almost forty years. This bridge building over Kabul’s opposition may also signify Russia’s concurrent effort to make friends with anyone who is estranged, as Pakistan undoubtedly is, from Washington since anti-Americanism drives much of Russian foreign policy. So it would hardly be unusual if anti-Americanism did not somehow play into Moscow’s overall recalculation of its interests in South and Central Asia. Moreover, by sponsoring the Taliban’s role in any future government and taking the lead to bring about that outcome, Moscow forces itself into consideration as a future patron of any postwar Afghan government, especially if it contains Taliban members.

If this assessment holds, then it would represent another case where China, through purely diplomatic and economic means, had been able to induce Russia to change or reverse course on key foreign policies. We have already seen the sale of equity in Russian energy assets to China, often at fire sale or dubious prices, e.g. in the Power of Siberia gas pipeline where the price of gas remains to this day a state secret, or in advanced weapons that Russia never before sold first to China before selling it to India as in the SU-35 Fighter.¹⁰⁰ Russia’s rapprochement with Pakistan, even though Russian experts had long said that Moscow regarded that state as the most dangerous potential proliferator and sponsor of terrorism, might represent another example of this phenomenon. And if so, it would represent another significant indicator in the trend lines of the overall Russo-Chinese relationship as well as an epochal development in Moscow’s South and Central Asian policies.

In its dealings with Pakistan Russia’s instruments are the usual ones of its pursuit of partners, arms sales and potential energy deals. While Pakistan’s hunger for energy is well known; the rapprochement began with negotiations over arms sales that have now taken place and there have been several years of still inconclusive energy deals that may or may not lead somewhere. But if one extrapolates from the history of US-Pakistan relations of which Moscow cannot be unaware, then it is likely that these material

99. C. Gall, “In Afghanistan, U.S. Exits, and Iran Comes In”, *op. cit.*

100. *Ibid.*

inducements are unlikely to make Pakistan any more reliable or dependable to Moscow than it was to the US; Neither is it likely to stop Pakistan from continuing to sponsor myriad terrorist groups in South Asia and Afghanistan. Those assets are far too valuable to Islamabad for it to dispense with them to please Russia of whom it probably remains suspicious and with good reason. Thus this new partnership may remain to some degree a marriage of convenience. However, given the coincidence of the two sides' interests in Afghanistan and the potential role of China, this marriage and the convenience that it affords to both sides may last quite a while longer and become a deeper, even triangular arrangement, and lead into new branches and byways that would leave behind important consequences in Asian and world politics. An assessment of the role played by Russia in Afghanistan in the context of its ties to China and Pakistan would go far in helping to understand these dynamic processes. Despite the rapprochement with Pakistan it is likely that the latter's continued support for terrorism in India and Afghanistan is problematic. That certainly is the case in Pakistan's relations with China. Indeed, in 2016, Moscow firmly supported India's cross border raids across the Line of Control in Kashmir in response to Pakistani-supported terrorism.¹⁰¹

101. "Russia Tears into Pakistan on Cross-Border Terrorism; Says India Justified in Conducting Surgical Strikes", *Financial Express*, 3 October 2016, www.financialexpress.com.

Assessing Russia's Goals

Understanding the complex interstate dynamics at work here would also enable us to provide an assessment of Russia's objectives that goes beyond merely cataloguing its regional activities. It would also help CENTCOM and policymakers understand and navigate the treacherous currents of South Asian rivalries. Obviously without such an understanding and assessment it becomes difficult not only to grasp Russia's goals and these complex dynamics but also what we need to do to advance American interests and overcome Russian and other governments' obstructions. In assessing Russia's goals, it is only the beginning of wisdom to say that the main goals of its foreign policy are to preserve Putin and his system in power by isolating Russia from the West and creating a besieged fortress mentality in Russia among the population. In other words, as regards Russia it is clear that regime interest prevails by a huge margin over the national interest. And there is abundant evidence to substantiate that conclusion.¹⁰² Moreover, it is clear that demonstrating to all the world that Russia is a great power and must be consulted on all major issues of international security is equally essential to this construction of Russian goals and applies as much to Central and South Asia as it does elsewhere.¹⁰³

Nevertheless, rapprochement with Pakistan and support for the Taliban go beyond those considerations and are not necessary to achieve these particular goals. While it also is the case that Russia, as a matter of policy instrumentalizes the use of terrorism for its own benefit as it has done in Ukraine and the Middle East, its support for the Taliban is not explained by this fact. Indeed, despite the statements calling ISIS and Islamic terrorism the main or most urgent threat, the fact is that Russia has done very little against ISIS, nothing in Afghanistan and relatively little in Syria. Although ISIS in the North Caucasus and potentially in Central Asia represents serious and genuine threats to Russia, NATO clearly regards the Taliban in Afghanistan as a greater threat than ISIS. And support for the Taliban, such as that manifested by Russia and its other partners, is not needed to ensure the security of Central Asia, the stated purpose of Russian intelligence

102. E. Rumer, "Russia's China Policy: This Bear Hug Is Real", National Bureau of Research, Asia, in *NBR Report* No. 66, "Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines", July 2017, pp. 17-19, www.nbr.org; S. Blank, "Russia's Goals and Objectives in Syria", in: F. Fleitz (Ed.), *Putin's Reset: The Bear Is Back And How America Must Respond*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Security Policy Press, 2016, pp. 25-36

103. *Ibid.*

sharing and weapons transfers to the Taliban. This is because Moscow, since the 1990s, has been warning about the generic terrorist threat from Afghanistan that clearly includes the Taliban. Similarly Moscow has often inveighed against the practice of labeling a group “good” terrorists and their opponents as “bad” terrorists even if it consciously does so itself.¹⁰⁴ So there is no good a priori reason to believe that suddenly in 2013 the Taliban changed its stripes to merit Russian support. The reasons for Russian support of the Taliban therefore go beyond concern for the security of Central Asia.

Therefore, we must look deeper and more broadly afield to grasp the totality of Russian goals here beyond shoring up the regime, protecting Central Asia and Russia against terrorism and being acknowledged as a great, independent, sovereign power in order to explain support for the Taliban and Pakistan over India and Afghanistan. These policies are not needed to accomplish those aims and in fact some of these actions may be counterproductive to the aim of protecting against terrorism given Moscow's support for Pakistan and its terrorist protégé the Taliban.

104. S. Blank, “Russia Decides Who the Terrorists Are”, Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 6 January 2016, <https://jamestown.org>.

Conclusions

There is no reason to believe that Russian engagement in and about Afghanistan will cease anytime soon or resolve itself peacefully without resort to other manifestations of proxy war like terrorism if the US withdraws. Russia's participation in the great game—of which these policies are merely the latest manifestation or turn of the wheel—goes back over a century and is now intimately tied up with its vital interests, threat perceptions, and sense of itself as a great power. But adding a few thousand more troops and increasing pressure on Pakistan, even if the latter is done quite brutally, is unlikely to be enough to stabilize Afghanistan or to discourage Russia and the other external actors from continuing to support what has become a proxy war. Indeed, it is fair to observe that Afghanistan has been destabilized from without and within for almost 40 years and it is doubtful if anyone even knows how to reassemble the component parts of a functioning and self-sufficient Afghan state. Nevertheless, when Russia and its partners like Pakistan and China either actively or passively support the ongoing destabilization of Afghanistan or any other state it is not enough to send a few thousand more troops and pressure only one of the external bad actors even if it, like Pakistan, might be the worst offender there. What is clear is that absent a real political strategy to accompany the military one no real resolution of this forty year-war is achievable in any foreseeable future and that is also because Afghanistan's internal wounds facilitate endless replays of the Great Game like the one currently in view. And despite President Trump's proclamation of a new strategy; it still is the case that we have yet to see this new strategy, and even if we do, it still may not be enough to change either Pakistan or Russia, or China's impulse to intervene in Afghanistan's seemingly endless travails.

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