

AFGHANISTAN: POTENTIAL FIELD OF RUSSIA-U.S. REGIONAL COOPERATION

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Introduction

Today cooperation between Russia and the U.S. in Central Asia, as part of the international efforts designed to neutralize the regional threats and challenges, is best described as spontaneous. There are, however, certain spheres in which their cooperation could be wider for the sake of regional stability. Afghanistan, which remains the main source of the destabilization threat, should become the main target of such cooperation.

Both countries need stability in this part of the world; they are united in their desire to cut

short radical extremist activities and drug production in this country. In fact, this is a rare example of unanimity related to several points on the long list of international priorities. Their cooperation might even develop, sometime in the future, into a system of regional security concurrent with the interests of both states and the world community. There is hope that these approaches will be discussed, among other issues, at the Moscow Russian-American summit scheduled for July 2009.

American Regional Policy and the Coalition's Strong and Weak Points as Seen from Moscow

Presidents Obama and Medvedev, the newly elected heads of the United States and Russia, told the world that the relations between the leading countries of the security structures (NATO, CSTO, and SCO) operating in Central Asia (and elsewhere) needed to be "reset." This will give these countries the opportunity to arrest their slide into another Cold War. In this context Afghanistan is practically the only field in which the interests of both countries related to the key issue of international security coincide.

The still unsettled conflict in Afghanistan and its echo can be described as a major negative factor that undermines regional stability and affects the world community as a whole. So far, stability in

Afghanistan is maintained by the U.S.-led counterterrorist coalition based on NATO forces. If squeezed out of Afghanistan, radical Islamist structures will spread across the region. This will upturn the Central Asian states' domestic stability.

On the other hand, the Russian Federation and the other CSTO members are not involved in the ISAF military component and have so far limited their cooperation to transit services. This and the other coalition's blunders increased, rather than reduced, the threat of the challenges spreading to Afghanistan's neighbors.

The European Union and the SCO are concentrating on economic and humanitarian issues; they are taking great pains to emphasize the absence of any military interests outside their antiterrorist efforts. China, one of the principal actors in Central Asia and an active SCO member, prefers to keep away from military-political cooperation either with the West or with the CSTO even if the threats to its national security bring its interests in the military sphere very close to those of the other actors.

It seems unlikely that any of the above-mentioned countries concerned with their purely egoistical interests will achieve regional domination. In fact, none of the outsiders and none of the organizations involved, with stabilization projects of their own, in Afghanistan and Central Asia as a whole can stand opposed, on its own, to the traditional and non-traditional threats the region and the adjacent areas are producing.

An analysis of Washington's approaches reveals two factors:

- First, the United States will probably go on with the Greater Middle East project and will try to incorporate the local states into its sphere of influence. Very much as its predecessor, the new U.S. administration will look at Central Asia as a potential object of its "zone of responsibility," which covers the "areas of instability" (Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and certain other states).
- Second, President Obama will probably accept the previous strategy and will concentrate on dealing with the Afghan-Pakistani problem. He has already made public the plans to increase military aid to both countries and achieve greater involvement of the Kabul regime in the joint efforts by intensifying training of the armed and special forces of Afghanistan. The Americans are resolved to cut down the number of civilian casualties, extend even stronger support to the institutional developments in the country, and end drug trafficking.¹

There are no plans to involve the CSTO and SCO in cooperation probably because that would demand revision of the system of international relations in the region. While supporting the antiterrorist centers of both structures and the SCO-Afghanistan contact group (which has already invigorated international anti-terrorist cooperation in the region), Washington will probably remain loyal to its former individual approach to each of the Central Asian countries.

The United States, however, will have to readjust its Central Asian policies. The old administration was totally devoted to the idea of putting an end to Russia's influence in the region, however the widely promoted "resetting of Russian-American relations" will not allow the United States to go on in the same direction, not to mention leaving Moscow baffled. This will do nothing to improve freight transit to Afghanistan and is not what the United States seeks to achieve.

Today there are about 75 thousand servicemen stationed in Afghanistan; 56.5 thousand of whom belong to the ISAF.² The U.S. president plans to add another 17 thousand servicemen to the American contingent. The contingent is stationed in 5 regional commands and is based on a developed military infrastructure consisting of 27 deployment points (see Fig. 1).

¹ "NATO Integrated Data Service," *NATO News*, 26 February-11 March, 2009.

² In the last 7 years the numerical strength of the ISAF troops has increased over 10-fold.

It seems that recently the U.S. forces were put on “stand-by” mode in the expectation of boosted activities. This forced the European and Canadian ISAF contingents to operate on their own in the country’s south and northwest where the Taliban was showing signs of revival.

There is every reason to expect a new wide-scale military operation in Afghanistan and in the border areas (on both sides of the Durand Line) as soon as American reinforcements arrive. This will obviously call for a careful analysis of the successes the coalition has scored and the blunders it has committed in the course of “Afghan appeasement.”

Figure 1

ISAF Military Bases
in Afghanistan



The United States and its allies demonstrated a lot of resolution; their interference was well timed; they made wide use of the units of the Northern Alliance, which, thanks to Russia’s military-technical assistance, proved to be valuable allies. The success achieved at the active phase of warfare were ensured by large-scale, regular, and effective missile and air strikes on the Taliban command and control centers and positions as well as highly efficient special operations in which coalition and Afghan commanders of the anti-Taliban alliance acted together supported from the air. The enemy was routed by a comparatively limited force and with comparatively few lives lost.

Psychological and information warfare was an important and highly productive element of the Operation Enduring Freedom. Special psychological and information acts were aimed at the al-Qa’eda

and Taliban fighters, units of the Afghan army, and the civilian population. In a country with a negligible number of TV sets and radios, leaflets and public-address systems were inevitably the main instruments.³ These actions were backed up by stabilization measures: good relations among the contingents fighting side by side and with the coalition command, government and non-governmental organizations, and the population for the sake of the operation's success.

The coalition owed its success partly to the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) and teams charged with establishing contacts with local administrations active in different parts of the country. They helped restore the ruined economic infrastructure and reach an understanding with the local authorities, field commanders, and elders on using local resources to support the army. They were behind the local official and grassroots approval of the coalition forces and helped the coalition command cope with legal issues.

Democratic changes began as soon as the Taliban was routed: a Loya Jirga (constituent assembly) was convened; political power was transferred to the legally elected parliament; and a national government was set up. Large national minorities became more or less autonomous—a very important step toward the country's rehabilitation.

Later, however, the excessive optimism about the future of the country, which stemmed from the obvious essentially nationwide support of the coalition forces, resulted in bad mistakes. The operation's drive was prematurely checked while the need to address the Iraqi problem transferred the operation to the regime of a planned and inadequately supplied closing stage. The surviving Taliban fighters escaped deep into agricultural areas and mountains to lick their wounds and restore their fighting capacity.

The expectations of substantial material assistance from the world community were unjustified, though at the early stages the world was concerned enough about the threat the country posed to global stability and security. This to a certain extent led to turning a blind eye to the mounting drug production as the population had no choice but to grow poppy in order to survive and support the numerous semi-legal military structures with relatively independent field commanders.

It was wrong to remove field commanders popular among the various ethnic groups from the power structures. Done too soon, this made them if not active supporters of the opposition, then latent ill-wishers of the coalition and central government.

These and many other mistakes made stability impossible. Recently the government published its state of the nation report, which registered mounting tension across the country. In 2007, NATO troops were attacked about 130 times a month; today this figure has reached 600. In a number of regions the PRTs stopped their activities. Some international humanitarian organizations are gradually pulling their people out. Taliban fighters are reported to be acting unhampered in Paktia, Khost, Zabul, Kandahar, Helmand, and Nimruz.

The efforts to maintain peace and stability are claiming more and more lives. Since 2006, the number of casualties has been steadily rising—they are mainly fighters, but civilians, employees of humanitarian organizations, and officials are also among the victims. Since the beginning of 2009, 3,700 Afghans (1 thousand of them being civilians) perished in the hostilities in the country's south and east. By 17 April, 2009, the coalition lost 1,128 military (the United States lost 606; over 2.7 thousand American privates and officers have been wounded).

The government remains passive in the face of the Taliban's pressure. There is an opinion that the leadership is much more concerned with what is going on in the north where field commanders tend to openly ignore the center. This throws the disagreements between the NATO commanders and the Karzai Cabinet into bolder relief.

³ During the operation, over 80 million leaflets were dropped on the territory of Afghanistan with a population of about 27 million.

Meanwhile, the Taliban's guerilla warfare against the NATO forces and official government is rapidly unfolding. Taliban units are very mobile and do not need military infrastructure; acts of diversion and terror are growing more threatening. The local guerillas have al-Qa'eda fighters and volunteers from Muslim countries on their side, in some of the provinces local people, likewise, are on the Taliban side. Guerillas operate on drug money. They rely on many years of fighting in familiar terrain, they spurn comforts and are driven by religious fanaticism. In the absence of NATO troops permanently stationed in the south they restored their influence there.

An analysis of the present situation in Afghanistan shows that its ethno-national and ethno-territorial specifics should be carefully studied and taken into account at the new stage of the efforts to achieve stability.

The social structure is still patriarchal and is based on clan and tribal relations; the way of life is archaic. The country can be best described as an ethnic patchwork, which means that there is no Afghan nation in the general meaning of this term. Its over 27 million-strong population is divided into numerous ethnic groups. The Pashtoons (who comprise 40-45 percent of the total population and are the main source of Taliban fighters) form the dominant ethnic group; the Tajiks (there are up to 20 percent of them) side with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance; the Khazareans constitute 16 percent; Uzbeks 9 percent; and there are also Turkmen and Baluchis.

It should be said that domination of the Pashtoons is the key factor of political stability. Today, the Karzai government lacks such domination, an omission that cannot be compensated for by powerful foreign support. It seems that democratic and common human values are unlikely to strike root in Afghanistan.

In the ethno-territorial respect the southern and eastern provinces are the traditional instability source, which explains why there were neither PRT nor contact teams nor humanitarian missions in these areas. In all other places, however, Taliban fighters force the local people to destroy the results of the "infidels'" great efforts. By day group members restore what was destroyed or build anew while by night they have to rebuff Taliban attacks. Almost all the provinces are caught in economic stagnation with accompanying unemployment and poverty. This means that people will hardly side with NATO against the Taliban.

The terrain is highly unfavorable; moving around the country is a far from easy task⁴ aggravated by complex meteorological conditions. Moreover, the country is protected by almost impassable and easy defendable mountain ranges. This means that on the ground the troops will encounter great problems in maneuvering and material-technical support, especially in the south.

The recent experience of fighting in Afghanistan indicates that there are several more failures that the coalition will have to remedy. Quite often, contingents within the ISAF are excessively autonomous and frequently fail to exchange intelligence. Fighting under their own command, the Americans violate the principle of single command accepted everywhere in the world; not infrequently they fail to inform the allies about planned actions.

Troop deployment and the responsibility zones of the allies do not always correspond to the contingents' numerical strength and the tasks to be accomplished. The troops stationed in the south and the east have to carry the main burden of fighting while the Germans and Italians stationed in the north are more concerned about obeying their governments' instructions to ensure their own safety. This cannot but perplex the American, Canadian, and Danish troops carrying the main burden of responsibility and sustaining the greatest losses.

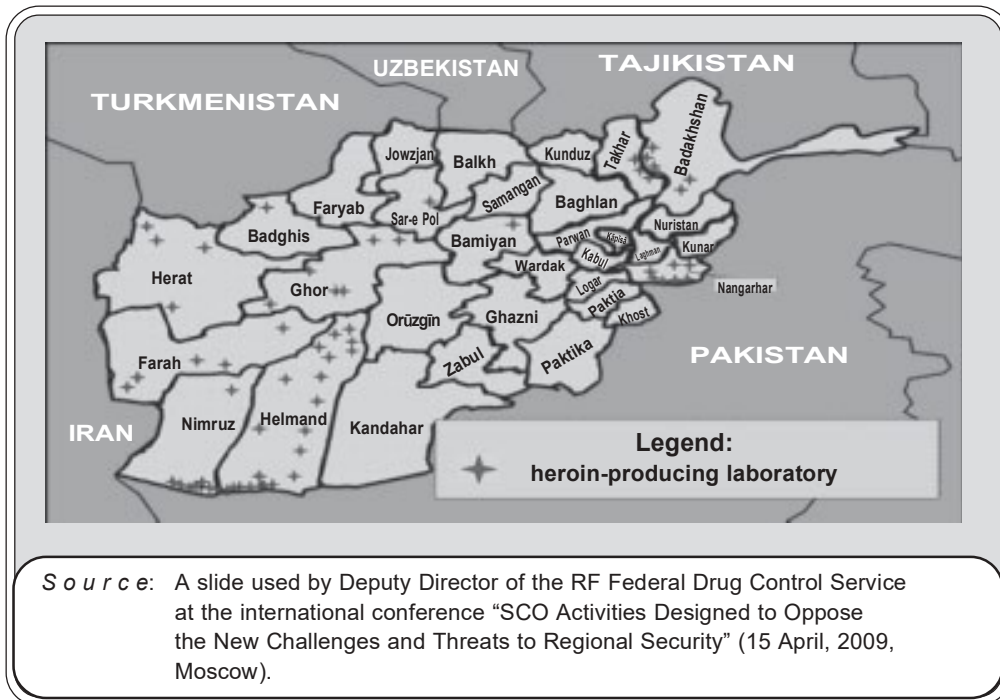
There is another aspect of the present situation in Afghanistan that deserves special attention. I have in mind drug production, the volumes of which created the term "global Afghan narco-expansion." According to expert assessments, the production of opiates in Afghanistan has increased

⁴ In the mountains, units moving on foot can cover 200-500 m/hr, which is 10 to 15 times less than in the valleys.

44-fold since the moment the American and ISAF forces entered the country to account for 93 percent of world production, which covers the requirements of all opiate-users in the world.⁵ The areas under opium poppy have increased nearly 40-fold—from 7.6 thousand hectares in 2001 to 193 thousand hectares in 2007. Hundreds of heroin laboratories were set up (see Fig. 2). Today Afghanistan is the world's second largest producer of cannabis (hashish and hashish oil).

Figure 2

Distribution of Heroin Laboratories



Up to 60 percent of the locally grown opium is synthesized into heroin inside the country. This cannot be done without a huge amount of precursors brought from abroad.⁶ According to the U.N., drug production employs about 3 million Afghans or 13 percent of the country's population. This has already developed into an inalienable part of socioeconomic life with no competitive alternative in sight. The money (\$40 million) the United States allocates to destroy poppy plantations and stimulate alternative agricultural cultures cannot resolve this problem. The barely developed border infrastructure and its technical support, which leaves the state border porous along many stretches, do nothing to stem the flow of drugs from Afghanistan.⁷

⁵ Report by Deputy Director of the RF Federal Drug Control Service Yu. Maltsev delivered at the international conference “SCO Activities Designed to Oppose the New Challenges and Threats to Regional Security” held on 15 April, 2009 in Moscow.

⁶ About 13 thousand tons of precursors are needed to process this amount of local opium; according to information supplied by Kabul, in the last two years only 200 tons of precursors were confiscated.

⁷ A mere 2 percent of the total amount of drugs moved across the border is confiscated at the border.

This creates a paradox: the present conviction that terrorism should be fought on its home ground leaves its financial and economic basis intact.⁸ This means that the efforts to destroy the Taliban and its recruiting, military, and material structures which keep the “fighting industry” afloat call for more than another military operation in Afghanistan but also a joint struggle, together with the world community, against narco-traffic which pays for terrorist activities.

The new phase of efforts to restore normalcy in Afghanistan will inevitably call for an invasion of Pakistan. The Taliban logistics in North Waziristan must be destroyed even if this is hardly feasible. Somewhat apprehensive of this extremist movement, the leaders of Pakistan do not want to see ISAF forces in the country’s north; there are talks about mining the border to prevent Taliban fighters crossing the Durand Line. This, however, will also keep the NATO contingent away.

On the whole, the coalition forces will pursue the following military-political aims in the course of the coming military operation:

- Total routing of the Taliban in the south and east; liquidation of its most implacable leaders (it might be transformed sometime in the future into a moderate movement with new leaders ready to talk to official Kabul);
- Setting up conditions conducive to political and socioeconomic reconstruction of the territories liberated from the Taliban and cooperation with the Pashtoon tribal leaders in the border area to set up a security zone along the border between the two countries.

History has taught us that force is not enough to bring stability to Afghanistan. This means that it can be restored as a secular and peaceful state solely by means of political and economic methods employed to achieve a mutually acceptable alternative. Force should be used only against Taliban and al-Qa’eda fighters. Civilians should be provided with maximum protection—something the ISAF has so far failed to achieve.

This means that interstate cooperation in the region should rest on a model that presupposes similar or identical strategic interests of Afghanistan and other countries, the United States and its allies as well as Russia and its CSTO/SCO partners in particular. To achieve this all the sides thus involved must arrive at a coordinated and balanced policy designed to neutralize the wide range of threats and challenges. A joint strategy of response to such threats and challenges that would involve the regional actors, world powers, organizations, and alliances interested in regional stability would clearly show such a coordinated and balanced approach.

The Prospects of Russian-American Cooperation within the International Structures Active in the Region

The disagreements over certain issues of Central Asian stability and security notwithstanding, Moscow and Washington have common interests: the anti-terrorist struggle, strategic stability, conflict settlement, WMD non-proliferation, etc. These are common tasks that presuppose cooperation rather than rivalry. Russia and the United States as well as the international structures in which they

⁸ In 2008, American special services officially admitted that part of the narco-money is spent on terrorist structures in Afghanistan.

are involved should pool their efforts. There are several promising trends of their cooperation, which will involve the Central Asian states. The sides should achieve a constructive dialog with them and between NATO and CSTO, two structures of regional security.

The dialog should produce new methods to be applied against all agents that threaten regional stability. At its Istanbul summit NATO spoke in favor of sharing responsibility with the CSTO for Central Asian security. The CSTO has already moved in this direction and is prepared to cooperate with the Alliance in all the main areas.⁹

Today, cooperation between America and Russia cannot move forward without restored and even deeper measures of confidence between them, which was undermined, to great extent, by the Caucasian events. They should be carefully analyzed; what happened in the Caucasus in 2008 brings to mind the Balkan events of 2001 when Moscow froze its relations with NATO. In 2008, it was Washington that froze its relations with Moscow. An impartial analysis will help defrost the situation and avoid similar developments in the future.

Russia and the United States could also work together in the Russia-NATO Council. Much can be done to revive the Council and military exchanges; broaden the discussion of operational cooperation in the future ranging from counterterrorist to peacekeeping, as well as further development of the operational compatibility of troops and forces; develop integrated communication means; exchange troop training experience, etc.

Individual cooperation can potentially be correlated with a collective dialog, therefore it seems useful to study the military-political resource the sides have accumulated within the Partnership for Peace program. This task can be formulated as building up partnership between NATO and the CSTO on the basis of the experience of bilateral relations accumulated by other CSTO members. This is important: it seems that in the near future peacekeeping might develop into the CSTO's main function—a relevant official decision has been made.

Meanwhile, both Russia and its CSTO partners can learn a lot from the United States and NATO. This is especially true of civil-military cooperation (CIMIC), which is involved in restoring the ruined infrastructure in the peacekeeping zones. My personal observations of NATO peacekeepers during their training at centers in Europe and CIMIC involvement, as part of PRT in the north of Afghanistan, convinced me of their efficiency. So far this important element of stabilization in conflict zones is still undeveloped in the Russian training programs. While Washington could become a coordinator of such programs for Russian and Central Asian peacekeepers for their future involvement in international peacekeeping efforts.

The agreement between the heads of state and government of the NATO countries and Russia on cooperation in crisis regulation serves as a solid foundation for joint peacekeeping. It was decided to develop the Concept for Joint Russia-NATO Operations: it is abundantly clear that a joint "anti-crisis response" in any region of the world has become a must which is much more needed than before. The Russian peacekeepers have the experience of cooperation with Americans acquired in the Balkans when they operated as part of the American North division.

The fight against narco-traffic is the third cooperation sphere. Success in the Afghan sector primarily depends on an integrated approach: instead of cooperation among official structures as practiced today the interested sides should launch international operations. Issues related to Afghanistan should be discussed by the United Nations while contacts should be maintained both at the working and official levels along the Russia-the U.S./NATO, EU, and OSCE line.

A road map is badly needed to show the way toward a gradual, stage-by-stage solution to the Afghan drug problem. The Afghan government should be supported in its efforts not only to liquidate

⁹ Letter of CSTO Secretary General N. Bordiuzha to NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer of 8 July, 2004 in which he outlined the main trends of a dialog and relations between the two organizations.

the opium poppy plantations but also to set up a full-fledged social and economic infrastructure. An international supervisory board should be set up to coordinate international aid to Afghanistan and improve its efficiency.

Borders should be reliably guarded with the help of state-of-the-art technology—this alone will close many channels through which drugs reach other countries. Russia and the Central Asian states are not the only ones that want this problem to be resolved. The NATO members can and should help Afghanistan's closest neighbors. Practical cooperation between the border guards and special forces of the SCO/CSTO members and the ISAF might help to stop the flow of drugs on the Afghan border; joint exercises can be followed by joint operations.

An international database on drug trafficking and exchange of experience related to the problems and achievements in the struggle against the drug threat among corresponding organizations would undoubtedly make this struggle more effective. The training programs for anti-drug specialists from Afghanistan and Central Asian countries organized within the SCO and NATO under the U.N. aegis should be extended; mobile training courses might prove useful.

Liquidation of the source of negative impact in the region represented by radical Islamic trends is the fourth important task that requires closer cooperation with the legal Muslim organizations.

Afghanistan's conflict potential is fed from abroad by radical fundamentalist centers—this is a political and military as well as humanitarian problem. The majority of the country's population is legally and religiously illiterate; their political convictions are half-baked. Coupled with the large strata of functionally illiterate and idle young people (the number of whom is rising amid the social and economic problems), this does nothing to breed stability. It would be expedient to discuss a joint program within U.S.-Russia cooperation designed to look at the sources, causes, and stimuli of religious extremism and the channels through which it is funded and infiltrates into Central Asia. Joint research of possible flare-ups of ethnic intolerance and religious extremism and their intensity can be also useful.

The ideologists of Islamic extremism and terrorism are past masters of manipulating public opinion through religion. Therefore, it seems expedient to create an educational project within the framework of international cooperation designed to promote secular Islam with the help of legal theological institutions. This can be done: traditional religious institutions are undergoing revival in Central Asia, which means that the most respected of them can send their theologians and missionaries to Afghanistan.

Peaceful life is the fifth possible trend of joint actions. The widest possible international aid is needed here. The SCO-Afghanistan contact group can work together with the U.S. and NATO, which will create a basis for regional cooperation. The most urgent trends should be identified. Roads look like the most promising field of economic cooperation. For example, the Zaranj-Delaram highway will join the Garland highway to provide access to the western Indian ports and shorten the road to the sea by 1,000 km.

Water is another stabilization factor in Afghanistan—without it its agriculture cannot be restored or developed. The problem has several solutions, including the Amu Darya River as one of the alternatives. All of them need investments, which not only Uzbekistan and Tajikistan but also Russia, the United States, and international organizations should treat as priorities.

Power supply is critically important for restoring peaceful life in the country and for the region's sustainable development. International organizations and transnational corporations, which are being drawn into the project on the U.S.'s and Russia's initiative, have the capacity to fund the Termez-Puli Khumri-Kabul power line.

The ruined infrastructure should be restored (including about 140 Soviet-built facilities of state importance), but it is premature to talk about Russia cooperating with the ISAF because of the very complex military situation in Afghanistan and the "Afghan syndrome" still alive in Russia.

Conclusion

Stability in Afghanistan is very hard to achieve and is just as hard to maintain. This task will require time, goodwill, and the joint efforts of numerous actors. The process, however, is calling for urgent action and is vitally important for a civilization confronted with numerous threats and challenges. This means that Russia and the U.S. should arrive at a joint strategy of anti-crisis measures that will embrace all spheres of regional stability and security in the military as well as economic, humanitarian, and other spheres on a multilateral basis. Moscow and Washington have a good chance of establishing regional cooperation and “resetting” their relations. For the sake of the world community this chance should not be missed.