

AFGHANISTAN

A VIEW FROM MOSCOW

DMITRI TRENIN and
ALEXEI MALASHENKO



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

WASHINGTON DC • MOSCOW • BEIJING • BEIRUT • BRUSSELS

AFGHANISTAN A VIEW FROM MOSCOW

Dmitri Trenin and Alexei Malashenko

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

WASHINGTON DC ▪ MOSCOW ▪ BEIJING ▪ BEIRUT ▪ BRUSSELS

© 2010 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
All rights reserved.

The Carnegie Endowment does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented here are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Endowment, its staff, or its trustees.

For electronic copies of this report,
visit www.CarnegieEndowment.org/pubs.

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
Phone: 202-483-7600
Fax: 202-483-1840
www.CarnegieEndowment.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

5	Summary
7	Introduction
9	The Situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan
13	Russia's Real and Perceived Interests in Afghanistan and Its Aims Regarding Coalition Activities in Afghanistan
17	Russia's Policies in Afghanistan in Support of Its Own Interests
21	Russia's Interests vis-à-vis Those of Other Powers
25	Can These Interests Be Reconciled?
27	The Impact of Russia's Pursuit of Its Interests on Achieving Stability in Afghanistan and the Success of Coalition Goals and Operations in Afghanistan
29	Conclusions and Recommendations
32	About the Authors
33	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

SUMMARY

The Afghanistan problem has many angles, but a view from the North—the perspective of Russia—has been missing from many previous analyses. The ten-year-long Soviet military involvement in the country is too often dismissed as having little in common with NATO’s current mission. The Soviet Union, after all, has failed, and NATO still plans to succeed. For the Russians themselves, the “Afghan syndrome” continues to be very powerful and warns against any new engagement in Afghanistan. While many in Russia still see developments in Afghanistan in a historical context, however, Russia is entwined in a complex web of relationships with the Afghan parties, neighboring states, and the West. Moscow is an important part of the Afghan equation.

The outcome of Western involvement in Afghanistan is likely to be determined by whether an acceptable and stable power-sharing arrangement can be reached among the Afghan people themselves. Such an agreement will require reaching an accommodation between the Pashtuns and the other ethnic groups and finding a balance between the authority of the Kabul government and the many autonomy-minded provinces and tribes. Foreign forces in Afghanistan have the important role of hunting down terrorists and degrading the power of those who harbor them, but becoming too involved in a domestic conflict is a recipe for failure. President Obama has correctly seen the limits and constraints of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. The issue now is whether this insight is followed up with a credible strategy that leaves Afghanistan to the Afghans, while making sure that they pose no threat to the region, or the world.

Moscow is an important part of the Afghan equation.

INTRODUCTION

AFGHANISTAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW

7

In 2009, Russians somberly marked two anniversaries: that of the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and of their withdrawal in 1989. The ten-year-long war, which resulted in 14,300 Soviet soldiers' deaths, remains one of the most traumatic experiences in recent Russian history. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, it was at the height of its power. The United States, its rival, looked like a "pitiful and helpless giant" after seeing its ally, the shah of Iran, toppled and its embassy in Tehran occupied, with U.S. diplomats held hostage. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, their empire was entering its terminal phase. After 1989, Russians preferred not to think about Afghanistan or, indeed, the Muslim world; this became known as the "Afghan syndrome." When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in 1991, the new Central Asian states were deliberately left out of the post-Soviet commonwealth. However, the Muslim world soon caught up with Moscow. In the 1990s Chechnya, Tajikistan, Dagestan, and Ingushetia became battlefields where Russian soldiers took on Muslim fighters who looked much like the *mujahideen* the Soviets had met in Afghanistan.

What the Russians discovered in the mountains of the Hindu Kush was, above all, the power of militant Islam. They also saw the limits of reforming a traditional society and the impossibility of imposed modernization. They came to appreciate the intricacies of tribal society. They had to discount the power of military force relative to the power of the purse, and the power of the purse relative to the power of religious beliefs and tribal customs. They understood that all relationships with their Afghan counterparts were essentially reversible: An enemy would suddenly turn into an ally, and allies would easily betray them. They saw that the enemies and the allies of the moment deeply resented foreigners, even as they sought to exploit them to their own advantage. Finally, they regretted that they had not studied the British experience of a century before as they were preparing to engage themselves in the same area.

What the Russians discovered in the mountains of the Hindu Kush was, above all, the power of militant Islam.

After 9/11, Moscow was ready to render substantial assistance to the United States toward defeating the Taliban. In the five years that the Islamist radicals had held Kabul, and eventually close to 95 percent of Afghanistan, under their control, Russians feared a Taliban-supported radicalization of the former Soviet South, from Central Asia to the North Caucasus and in other Muslim republics of the Russian Federation. However, Russia was very cautious about becoming involved again in Afghanistan beyond materially supporting its anti-Taliban allies in the country's North and sharing valuable intelligence with the United States. As Russia sought to consolidate its influence and promote its interests in Central Asia, it was content to leave Afghanistan to the U.S.-led coalition. After all, Americans and their allies were fighting Russia's potential enemies and thus removing the most credible external military threat to the Russian Federation.

At first impressed by the swiftness and the apparent ease of Operation Enduring Freedom, the Russians later became psychologically relieved that the Americans were not, after all, ten feet tall and were prone to make mistakes, just as the Soviets had. After a while, this feeling of contentment transformed into a growing concern about the implications of a possible failure of the U.S.-led effort in Afghanistan and of a deterioration of the situation in Pakistan or a conflict between Pakistan and India. This is where Russia remains, as the United States has proclaimed a new policy in Afghanistan, ordered a surge in its military presence there, and started a series of military campaigns aimed at defeating the Taliban and getting them ready for national reconciliation—on Kabul's (i.e., Washington's) terms.

THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

AFGHANISTAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
9

The Obama administration has modified the U.S.-led coalition's goals in Afghanistan. Rather than wiping out al-Qaeda, defeating the Taliban, and helping the Afghans build a modern democratic state friendly to the West, the emphasis is on isolating and eliminating the more radical elements within the Taliban while engaging the more moderate ones, and stabilizing Afghanistan to such an extent that it stops being a source of danger to the West and an engine of instability in the region.

This is a more realistic approach. However, the current U.S. strategy, evidently resulting from a compromise within the U.S. government and the national security establishment, remains contradictory. Al-Qaeda, the main reason for U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan, has largely left the country. Its leadership is thought to be in Pakistan; its operations are being launched from other countries, such as Yemen. While the Taliban maintains its al-Qaeda connection, it is basically an Afghan rather than a trans-national movement. The U.S.-led military effort, which started as an attempt to wipe out those who had masterminded the 9/11 attacks and those who hosted them, has turned into a foreign military involvement in a civil war within a Muslim country.

Western nation-building in Afghanistan has resulted in the promulgation of a constitution and the holding of elections. However, the 2009 presidential vote has not brought about a stable political settlement. Hamid Karzai's legitimacy as president has hardly been strengthened by what was believed to be a flawed vote. The parliamentary election, originally scheduled for the spring of 2010, has been postponed, and for good reason. A stable and strong central government in Afghanistan is not in sight. But is this a problem? Political decentralization agrees with the country's traditions, and any attempt to create a strong central authority immediately breeds

A stable and strong central government in Afghanistan is not in sight.

resentment. The issue in Afghanistan is not Kabul versus the provinces, but rather the ethnic balance within the Afghan government's structure. The intriguing question in this respect is the link between the Pashtuns, who make up a plurality, but not a majority, of Afghanistan's population, and the Taliban.

The nature of and the prospects for the Taliban remain unclear. They are hardly an aberration, as they seemed to be in the mid- and late 1990s, but can they be a legitimate political force? Are they emerging Pashtun nationalists, irreconcilable Islamist revolutionaries, or both? How monolithic is the Afghan Taliban movement? How amenable can the Taliban be to new Western attempts to buy their support or simply acquiescence? With the Pashtuns straddling the Afghan-Pakistani border and not really recognizing the Durand Line, which passes through their territory, how strong are the links between the Afghan and the Pakistani Taliban? Any serious political and military strategy in Afghanistan should have answers to those questions.

Beyond the Taliban versus Kabul dynamic, there is the issue of the Pashtuns versus Kabul—even though Karzai is a Pashtun. Afghanistan's future will depend on whether and how this issue is resolved. This, however, is a matter for the Afghans themselves. The support that the outsiders—including the Soviets in the past and the U.S.-led coalition today—give to the non-Pashtun ethnic groups, such as the Tajiks and the Uzbeks, breeds resentment against foreigners and those who are seen as their agents, such as Karzai. Generally, a foreign military presence helps recruit people to the cause of jihad. Unlike the situation in Iraq—where the U.S. and coalition forces were essentially caught in the cross-fire of a Sunni versus Shi'i civil war—in Afghanistan, the Western powers are a party in a domestic conflict, just as the Soviets were in the 1980s, and the insurgents are fighting under the banner of Islam.

A persistently unclear vision of policy goals and objectives is compounded by an expertise deficit. As they used to do with the Soviets, the Afghans are now lobbying effectively with the Americans, so that the United States risks being manipulated by its allies pursuing their own special agendas, as the notorious Ahmed Chalabi did in Iraq. Americans' reverse manipulation of the Afghans is far less widespread and effective.

On the military front, the Taliban controls up to 50 percent of the country's territory. Estimates of its military strength vary widely, but it is capable of using modern weapons, engaging

the enemy with small groups, coordinating those groups' efforts, and picking the key targets. Their tactics have become more varied than those of the *mujahideen* in the 1980s and include suicide attacks. As in the past, one of their chief strengths as the force that is fighting foreign troops is the support among the local population. Capturing their "hearts and minds" is a most difficult mission, given the cultural chasm between the pre-dominantly Western coalition and ordinary Afghan villagers.

Building up the Afghan national army is a key priority of the current U.S. strategy. Increasing the numbers and the level of training is important, but the ethnic composition of the government force is even more important. Too many Tajiks in the senior positions, for example, would not endear the military to the Pashtuns. Victory, however, is not an option. The Taliban might retreat, but it will not wither away, and it cannot be controlled from the outside. The idea of domesticating Islamist radicals is deeply flawed. They cannot be bought. They cannot be held to agreements that start impinging on their interests. They can be manipulated, but not for long. At the end of the day they will disappoint their would-be minders. However, there might be a way to divert their energies toward safer and more productive channels.

Until the left-wing military coup that led to the Soviet intervention, Afghanistan had been a loosely organized and sleepy kingdom, a neutral buffer between the Russian/Soviet empire and its Anglo-American rivals. Afghan radicalism has thrived in wars against foreign occupying powers. Today its culture has been shaped by more than 30 years of continuous conflict; the "sleepy kingdom" image is gone forever, but an end to the conflict could focus Afghan—including Taliban—energies on national reconstruction. National Islamists could also become open to international dialogue. China and Muslim countries such as Malaysia or neighboring Turkmenistan could be facilitators. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation might be a useful convenor. Whatever the settlement in Afghanistan, however, it should not be made conditional on resolving the Pakistan problem.

It has become commonplace to discuss the problem facing the U.S.-led coalition in terms of "AfPak." There is a lot of cross-border interaction, but one cannot hope to achieve one's objectives in Afghanistan without regard to—and corresponding action toward—Pakistan. However, if one lumps Afghanistan and Pakistan together, nothing can be achieved.

Building up the Afghan national army is a key priority of the current U.S. strategy.

Pakistan is a country of 180 million people—almost 30 percent more than Russia. It has nuclear weapons. It is heavily focused on India, its enemy in several wars, starting with the 1947 partition and the continuing conflict over Kashmir, and its counterpart in the nuclear stand-off on the subcontinent. It is a valuable ally of the United States and China, and a friend of Saudi Arabia, which sponsored its nuclearization effort.

Pakistan is an even more complex society than Afghanistan, with a wide spread between its westernized urban elites and self-confident and nuclear-armed military, on the one hand, and the Islamist extremists and tribal warriors, on the other. Since gaining independence a little more than 60 years ago, it has been in a state of flux. Its vibrant and growing urban middle class aspires to modernization and democratic government, while its religious extremists use the country's thousands of madrassas as factories to churn out jihadists. Its powerful military is a self-appointed guardian of domestic order and the custodian of the nuclear arsenal; the military helped found the Taliban and trains militants who, in the name of Kashmir, occasionally attack targets deep inside India. Throw in A. Q. Khan, the top Pakistani nuclear scientist who admitted to having “single-handedly” run a nuclear bazaar, and the picture becomes roughly representative, if still incomplete. The future of Pakistan is an immensely important issue, not only for the region, but also for the world at large. Its relationship with Afghanistan is important, but Pakistan clearly is a significant policy issue on its own.

The future of Pakistan is an immensely important issue, not only for the region, but also for the world at large.

RUSSIA'S REAL AND PERCEIVED INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS AIMS REGARDING COALITION ACTIVITIES IN AFGHANISTAN

AFGHANISTAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
13

Russia views Afghanistan today largely through the prism of security threats to itself and its Central Asian neighborhood, where Moscow aspires to soft dominance. Afghanistan is also an element of Russia's complex and complicated relations with the United States and NATO. Finally, the Afghanistan-Pakistan situation affects Russia's relations with major non-Western powers, such as China, India, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. In the Russian political mind, rational calculations of interests and analyses of threats are superimposed, of course, on the Soviet Union's traumatic experience in Afghanistan—the "Afghan syndrome"—and on the post-Soviet Russian experience in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Tajikistan.

In terms of perceived threats, two stand out. One is the prospect of instability in Central Asia, which would ensue if the Karzai government falls and the U.S./NATO military forces withdraw precipitously. This scenario carries a sense of *déjà vu*: The Taliban had come to power in Afghanistan, which encouraged Central Asian Islamists and offered training camps to Chechen rebels. Russia fears a rise in Islamist radicalism across the region and a revival of rebel activity in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. It does not have sufficient confidence in the solidity of the Central Asian regimes or in its own capacity to insulate the region from the influence of a victorious Taliban. Still, opinions in Russia differ as to how far the threat can reach. Some Russians espouse a kind of a domino theory and expect the "disaster area" to spread all the way to Russia's own borders. Most believe the Taliban will not expand far beyond Afghanistan.

Russia views Afghanistan today largely through the prism of security threats to itself and its Central Asian neighborhood.

The second threat is even more real and deadly: drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Recently, Russia has stopped being a drug transit country par excellence and has become a major consumer of Afghan heroin and opiates. According to the UN, Russia consumes only slightly less heroin each year than does the rest of Europe combined (70 tons versus 88 tons). Out of about 100,000 drug addicts dying each year worldwide, between 30,000 and 40,000 are Russians. Russian officials point out that the production of narcotics in Afghanistan has grown exponentially (44 times, according to the Russian government's anti-drug czar, Viktor Ivanov) since the fall of the Taliban and the arrival of the coalition forces. They are genuinely worried.

By way of contrast, Moscow has relatively little interest in Afghanistan per se. Historically, Russians had been content with Afghanistan as a buffer zone between their empire in Central Asia and Britain's in India. They appreciated Afghanistan's neutrality in the Cold War, when both Pakistan and Iran were U.S. allies and China was locked in its own Cold War-style conflict with the Soviet Union. They were surprised by the leftist coup that proclaimed Afghanistan a Moscow client and intervened only reluctantly when that regime threatened to disintegrate and create an opening for the United States. Once the painful decade-long Soviet intervention was over, the Russians preferred to forget about Afghanistan—until the Taliban arrived. Russia's current aims in Afghanistan include preventing an outright victory for the Taliban, essentially through the efforts of the U.S.-led coalition; stemming the flow of drugs out of Afghanistan, especially into Russia; and restoring a pacified and neutral Afghanistan as a buffer state between Central Asia and the Greater Middle East.

Russia's current economic interests in Afghanistan are modest. The trade turnover in 2008 was just under \$200 million. In principle, Russia would be interested in exploiting oil and gas fields in the country's north that were discovered by Soviet geologists. However, Russian business groups would prefer, if anything, to invest in neighboring Central Asia, which is richer in all kinds of resources, much more familiar to the Russians and immensely safer than Afghanistan. Russians also tend to believe, wrongly perhaps, that U.S. influence in Afghanistan minimizes their chances of doing business there. Moreover, China has emerged as a formidable economic rival to Russia in Afghanistan. It defeated Russian companies in the tender for the Ainak copper reserve, one of the biggest in the world.

The production of narcotics in Afghanistan has grown exponentially since the fall of the Taliban and the arrival of the coalition forces.

Ironically, Russia's negative interests in Afghanistan are more important than the positive ones. In order to protect its markets, Gazprom seeks to block projects involving a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and even an oil pipeline from Pakistan's port city of Gwadar to China.

Russia's interests in Afghanistan are mostly concentrated in the North of the country, with its largely Tajik and Uzbek populations. There, Russia continues to cultivate the close ties it had developed with the Northern Alliance. Afghanistan's North is directly linked to Central Asia, which Russia seeks to keep within its orbit. This is Moscow's paramount interest in the region. This ambition, however, outstrips Russia's available means. Russia does not work as a magnet for its neighbors. Central Asian countries do not want to be seen as Moscow's clients; their refusal to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia richly attests to that. Russia, however, has been playing on the Central Asians' concerns over Afghanistan's again becoming a base for their domestic radicalism. This is being done to increase Russia's own military and security presence in the region and to beef up the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Russian interests in Central Asia are supported by the threat of a Taliban victory in Afghanistan, if not by the Taliban itself.

RUSSIA'S POLICIES IN AFGHANISTAN IN SUPPORT OF ITS OWN INTERESTS

AFGHANISTAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
17

Russia's policy toward Afghanistan is a matter of some internal debate. Publicly, Russia supports the international effort to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan. In December 2009, President Dmitry Medvedev publicly endorsed U.S. President Barack Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan and offered Russia's support for Kabul, Washington, and NATO.

Moscow is gratified that the international operation has a UN mandate and that the parameters of Afghanistan's post-Taliban rehabilitation were laid down in 2001 at the Bonn conference, in which Moscow participated. Even though a number of senior Russians would privately like to see the U.S. fail in Afghanistan and join the Soviet Union and Britain in that "graveyard of empires," pragmatic Russian leaders realize that a Western defeat in Afghanistan would result in a rise of radicalism, which they themselves could not contain. However, the idea of sending Russian forces to Afghanistan is roundly rejected by the Russian government, the bulk of the country's political establishment, and the general public. The "Afghan syndrome" is still strong, 20 years after the Soviet withdrawal from the country.

Beyond that, opinions within the Russian establishment differ. Those who see the United States as Russia's main geopolitical adversary would want the United States to stay bogged down in Afghanistan indefinitely, preventing a Taliban victory, yet still unable to prevail themselves. They favor a policy of watching the Afghan developments from the sidelines, giving no serious assistance to the U.S./NATO forces there and remaining ready to cut a deal with the Taliban should it emerge in a strong position in the end. This contingent argues that too much support for Karzai now could harm Russian interests if the Karzai regime loses. On the other end of the spectrum are those who advocate much closer cooperation with the United States and NATO on Afghanistan. They hope that, by

The "Afghan syndrome" is still strong, 20 years after the Soviet withdrawal from the country.

becoming “friends in need” to the United States, they can sway Washington’s policy on the issues of principal importance to Moscow, mostly in the former Soviet Union. To the first group, this view looks naïve. A third group, composed of more straightforward thinkers, believes that Russia is interested in a coalition victory in Afghanistan for its own sake, because that would remove the most serious external challenge to date to Russia’s own security. As a result of the interplay of these basic positions, Moscow has been modestly supporting the Afghan government and the coalition.

Russia has maintained regular contact with Hamid Karzai, his government officials, and some local warlords to stay abreast of developments in the country. Moscow has extended some military assistance to Kabul. It has expressed willingness to train Afghan police and military officers and to sell the Afghan government arms, military equipment, and spare parts. Russia plans to make a comeback in Afghanistan, where it established an embassy in 2007, but it hedges its bets, unsure about Karzai’s longevity or the Western commitment. It does not want to run afoul of new Afghan authorities, should the current leaders be replaced. By pursuing such a course, it hopes to win a measure of political influence, mostly to ensure that others do not use Afghanistan against Russian interests, including economic ones. Until recently, Russia has enjoyed the sympathies of a group of senior Afghans it befriended in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet in the early 2000s, Moscow missed an opportunity to turn this group into something like a pro-Russia lobby. The Russian leadership was either not sufficiently impressed with the would-be lobbyists’ capabilities or had basically written off Afghanistan. Similarly, Russia had let go of its friends among Iraq’s Baathists, who regained a measure of influence several years after the U.S. invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein.

Moscow is agnostic on the nature of an eventual internal political arrangement in Afghanistan. It would certainly prefer some kind of stability in a country that borders three Central Asian states. However, Moscow realizes that an Afghan nation-state built around a Pashtun nucleus will not necessarily agree with the interests of Russia’s nominal allies, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and also Turkmenistan. Should that issue arise, one would have to expect some lobbying in Moscow by the groups linked to Tashkent, Dushanbe, and Ashgabat. Those doing the lobbying could try to blur distinctions between the Pashtuns and the Taliban.

Russia has signed agreements with the United States, Germany, France, and Spain allowing the transit of nonlethal military goods and, in some cases, personnel, weapons, and military equipment, across Russian territory by rail and through Russian air space: up to 4,500 flights per year. Thus, Russia sought to increase its value in the eyes of the United States and to demonstrate the “privileged” nature of its relations with some of the key countries of continental Europe.

Russia has been trying to engage the United States on the drug-trafficking issue. It believes that curtailing production of opium inside Afghanistan is the most effective way of handling the issue. Beyond Afghanistan’s borders, Russian officials claim, the price of drugs is such that fighting drug trafficking becomes simply prohibitive. The high degree of corruption in Russia and the Central Asian countries and the low efficiency of the anti-drug agencies are more likely the problem. According to the United Nations, Russia and the Central Asian states interdict only 4 and 5 percent of the traffic, respectively—far less than do Iran (20 percent), Pakistan (18 percent), or China (17 percent). Iran has to watch the “drug passes” from Turkmenistan, which re-exports Afghan-produced narcotics.

Moscow has long been pleading with NATO to establish alliance-to-alliance relations with the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, which Russia leads. This is deemed important as a sign of Western recognition of Russia’s politico-military primacy in Central Asia. NATO has shown little interest in doing so, despite Zbigniew Brzezinski’s support for such a move. Acting on its own, Russia has transformed its under-strength motor rifle division into a small military base in Tajikistan on the Afghan border and has established a small air base at Kant, Kyrgyzstan. It has been looking for another base in southern Kyrgyzstan to turn into a CSTO outpost.

At the same time, Russia has been trying to diminish the U.S. military footprint in Central Asia. In 2005, it used the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to demand an end to the U.S. military presence in Central Asia. It leaned on Kyrgyzstan to follow the Uzbek example and expel U.S. forces. However, the more recent intensification of fighting in Afghanistan and the need to enhance U.S./NATO forces there, which Russia basically supports, is at odds with its desire to remove the U.S. military from Central Asia. The Russians have to be content with sending periodic messages—through biannual SCO military exercises, conducted since 2005—that the U.S. military is not the only game in Central Asia.

RUSSIA'S INTERESTS VIS-À-VIS THOSE OF OTHER POWERS

AFGHANISTAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
21

Moscow clearly feels its position in Central Asia is challenged by others, above all by the United States, which it regards as *the Other*. This highlights the central contradiction of the Russian position. While the U.S./NATO operation in Afghanistan deals with a very serious security challenge to Russia, it has also made the United States a power in Central Asia—at Russia's expense, as seen from Moscow. In 2001 when Putin acquiesced to the United States' acquiring the right to use air bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, he made it clear that Russia considered those deployments temporary, for the duration of the stabilization effort in Afghanistan. However, that effort now has been going on for over eight years.

The rise of China has challenged Russia's position in Central Asia even more massively, fundamentally, and permanently than America's insertion into the region. However, Moscow, while traditionally allergic to military expansionism, is relatively tolerant toward the projection of economic influence, which distinguishes the Chinese practice in Central Asia from the American. Russia still regards the United States—not China—as its principal competitor. To oppose and constrain the U.S. role in the region, Moscow has been partnering with Beijing in building the SCO into a major international forum that in addition to China, Russia, and Central Asia, includes key players such as India, Pakistan, and Iran. Afghanistan, like the three latter countries, is an observer. In March 2009, the SCO held a conference in Moscow on Afghanistan—essentially to raise its own profile. The SCO, whose budget is a mere \$4 million, has no chance of playing a significant role within Afghanistan, including that of mediator between the Kabul government and elements of the Taliban. Its useful specialization remains conducting regional summits, and in this capacity it can serve as a venue for Afghanistan-related contacts.

China and Russia work in parallel on Afghanistan; they have no common position. China, especially after the 2009 riots in

The rise of China has challenged Russia's position in Central Asia even more massively, fundamentally, and permanently than America's insertion into the region.

Xinjiang, draws a line between al-Qaeda supporters among the Taliban and the more nationalist-oriented groups. Beijing advocates negotiations with the latter in search of some kind of peace settlement. China's general pro-dialogue approach contrasts with India's hard-line rejection of talking with the Taliban.

Afghanistan is an issue in Russia's relations with both India and Pakistan. For Delhi, the Afghan problem is rooted in the Taliban, which it sees as a creation of Pakistan. Thus, the root cause of the Afghan crisis is the Pakistani leadership, particularly its military wing, which has sought to harness Islamist extremism to destabilize India and gain ground in the neighborhood. Over the past decade, India's self-image has grown immensely. Its great ambitions run even further than its available power, which is also considerable. Indians would want the coalition to stay in Afghanistan, but they have no confidence that its staying power is sufficient. Thus, Indians are thinking through options for the eventuality of Western withdrawal before the mission is accomplished. India has been expanding its diplomatic efforts and other presence in Afghanistan. It is a moot point whether India would be prepared to send its own troops to Afghanistan.

Delhi has been Moscow's close partner, even a quasi-ally, for decades. India was one of the very few countries that refused to condemn the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Today, Russia has no problem with India's political presence in Afghanistan. Both countries suffer from terrorist attacks and are fighting Islamist radicals. However, the Indo-Russian relationship has started to become hollow. There is little consultation and virtually no coordination between the two countries on issues relating to Afghanistan. Even though Russia occasionally mounts public relations campaigns highlighting BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and RIC (Russia, India, and China) as pillars of a "post-Western world," Moscow is keenly aware of the rivalry between its two principal partners, Beijing and Delhi, and is careful not to be drawn into their disputes.

This rivalry is nowhere more intense than in relations with Pakistan. From a Pakistani perspective, Afghans are first of all Pashtuns; Pashtunistan lies between Islamabad and Kabul, straddling the Durand Line. There are more Pashtuns living in Pakistan than in Afghanistan, and yet for Afghanistan to gain a modicum of political stability, the Pashtuns must be at the center of any nation-building project. Pakistan has the most keys to help resolve the problem of governance in Afghanistan,

and it has the most incentive: It suffers more from Afghan instability than any other country. Pakistan acquiesces in following the U.S. policy course, but has no confidence in the effectiveness of the policy. Also, support for U.S. policies carries a price in terms of both domestic stability and Pakistan's national interests.

For Moscow, Pakistan had long been its principal adversary's accomplice. Pakistan served as a base for U.S. intelligence operations against the Soviet Union and, most crucially, was the main base for the Afghan resistance to the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, as well as the conduit for international aid to them. Russia, however, cannot afford to ignore a nuclear-armed Pakistan with a population that has recently topped Russia's own. Careful not to spoil its relationship with India, Russia has been maintaining and even expanding contacts with the Pakistani government and military. Yet the Russians realize they have little knowledge and even less influence as far as Pakistan's internal dynamics are concerned. They see Pakistan as a ward of America and China and hope that, in extremis, those two powers will prevent the worst outcome: a "nuclear meltdown."

Moscow's contacts with Tehran are broader and somewhat deeper than those with Islamabad, but they also are contentious. For Russia, Iran is a key regional player whose power continues to rise and an economic partner of some importance, especially in the energy sector. For all the difficulties of dealing with Iran, Russians see Iranians as essentially rational and, at times, cooperative. In the mid-1990s, Moscow and Tehran cooperated to put an end to the civil war in Tajikistan—the only post-Soviet conflict that has actually been resolved. Russia certainly benefited from a benevolent Iranian attitude to Moscow's actions in Chechnya and its Russia-friendly position within the Organization of the Islamic Conference. With regard to Afghanistan, Russia sees Iran as a stabilizing factor in Herat and as a partner in curbing drug trafficking.

Russia, of course, is in no position to influence Iran's behavior in Afghanistan, where Tehran has recently adopted a hands-off attitude. It favors national reconciliation in Afghanistan on the basis of a power-sharing deal among the Pashtuns and other ethnic groups. There is an interest involved: Iran still hosts between 2 million and 3 million Afghan refugees, and it wants them to return home. Expelling those people could stir up trouble, but Tehran could take that step, if only

to signal to Washington that Iran is a factor to be reckoned with. However, Iranians are concerned that a restored Sunni state in Afghanistan might destabilize Sunni areas on the Iranian-Afghan border.

Finally, Russia, in contrast to the period of its own intervention in Afghanistan, maintains a relationship with Saudi Arabia, which, while not particularly close, is active and generally friendly. Moscow has taken great pains to position itself as a friend of the Islamic world and win observer status with the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

CAN THESE INTERESTS BE RECONCILED?

AFGHANISTAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
25

There is no antagonism between Russia's interests in Afghanistan and those of any other major player. On many key issues these interests are fairly close. Russia was a de facto "ally of the Alliance" in 2001, contributing substantially, in political and intelligence terms, to the toppling of the Taliban by the U.S.-supported Northern Alliance forces. After that, Russia chose not to meddle in Afghan politics and did not contest the U.S. influence over the Karzai administration. Russia's geopolitical rivalry with the United States is in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and also the Caspian and the Caucasus. Even there, however, the issue is not some new edition of the Great Game, but rather the emergence of new states in the region that aspire to genuine independence from their former hegemon. These states are learning to move around on the international scene, choosing orientations and looking for balances. Russia's dream of soft dominance in Central Asia will remain a dream.

Moscow's support for U.S. goals in Afghanistan depends on U.S.-Russian and, by extension, NATO-Russian relations. The Bush administration offered the wrong incentives to win Russia's assistance: NATO expansion into the former Soviet Union (Ukraine and Georgia); U.S. support for a Georgian president bent on solving ethnic conflicts in his country by force; and a U.S. plan to deploy missile defenses close to Russia's borders and with some capability of weakening the Russian deterrence capacity. There is a widely held view in Moscow—now that these irritants are off the table during the Obama administration—that the general environment of U.S.-Russian relations is now more propitious for closer collaboration on issues such as Afghanistan.

Russia's dream of soft dominance in Central Asia will remain a dream

THE IMPACT OF RUSSIA'S PURSUIT OF ITS INTERESTS ON ACHIEVING STABILITY IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE SUCCESS OF COALITION GOALS AND OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

AFGHANISTAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
27

So far, Russia's policies have been generally consonant with the coalition's goals and efforts in Afghanistan. Moscow's realistic policy spectrum lies between passive and active support for U.S. and NATO policies there. However, even Russia's more active support for the coalition operation in Afghanistan would have only a marginal impact on the outcome of the U.S.-led international involvement there. Moscow sees its policies toward Afghanistan not as something shaped by the public good, such as helping to end the fighting or to restore peace and stability in the region. Rather, they are a means of bolstering Russia's geopolitical position and gaining material advantage. Afghanistan is also a bargaining chip in Russia's wider relations with the United States.

Occasionally voices in Moscow advocate a more energetic approach. In 2008–2009 several experts floated ideas of a Russian “industrialization” drive in Afghanistan. This view was also reflected in the Russian government's proposal, made at the London conference on Afghanistan in January 2010, to rebuild or modernize 142 Soviet-built enterprises in Afghanistan. Moscow, however, saw this as a business project for Russian companies, rather than development assistance, and asked for financial allocations and security guarantees. Needless to say, this proposal went nowhere. Still, Moscow was content with having made a proposal, even if it was rejected by unwilling Western donors.

Afghanistan is also a bargaining chip in Russia's wider relations with the United States.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Obama administration has decided in principle to work hard to achieve its new, scaled-down objectives and largely disengage from Afghanistan by the end of Barack Obama's current term in office. The administration needs to realize, however, that U.S. involvement with Afghanistan, Iraq, and the rest of the Muslim world is long-term. Abandonment—"cutting and running"—is not a good option, but swift and positive changes are not in the offing, either. The United States is in the greater Middle East for the long haul.

Washington understands, however, that the massive U.S. troop presence there is an asset that can turn into a major liability. Victory in Afghanistan cannot be achieved in the traditional military sense. Military operations need to mellow the Taliban just enough to separate and isolate the hard-line jihadists—to be further pursued and destroyed—from those whose interests are focused on power distribution within Afghanistan. The main effort in Afghanistan should be trying to bring the Afghan government and the opposition together to discuss the terms of a new national settlement. "Recruiting" allies from the enemy camp is tempting and might be a master stroke: consider Vladimir Putin's adoption of Akhmad Kadyrov, and then his son Ramzan, as a strongman for Chechnya. But it can also be a resounding failure, like the attempt to rely on the head of the Sharia courts in Somalia to bring order to that country.

America's NATO allies and their military contingents are important in helping bring about the political phase in the Afghan situation. From that point on, the United States will need to rely more on its non-NATO partners. Pakistan's influence with the Taliban will be crucial, but other countries can play a prominent role. A variety of states—China, India, and Russia, as well as Muslim states including the Central Asian and Gulf neighbors—all can help connect Afghan factions and impress on them the need to reach a deal. It is not too early to start coordinating this international effort. The United

The main effort in Afghanistan should be trying to bring the Afghan government and the opposition together to discuss the terms of a new national settlement.

States has a number of bilateral relationships with all relevant partners and allies. NATO, for its part, could engage Russia on Afghanistan within its existing Council, and the sporadic contacts between NATO and China could become institutionalized around the subject of Afghanistan. NATO could reach out to the Central Asian states in an ad hoc NATO-CSTO group, to keep Moscow in the loop. Some modus operandi on Afghanistan needs to be developed between the United States and Iran, a key player.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, has been with the Center since its inception. He retired from the Russian Army in 1993. From 1993–1997, Trenin held posts as a Senior Research Fellow at the NATO Defense College in Rome and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Europe in Moscow.

Alexei Malashenko is a member of the Carnegie Moscow Center's Research Council and co-chair of the Center's Religion, Society, and Security Program. A historian by training, he has taught at leading Russian universities, including the Higher School of Economics and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations.

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing cooperation between nations and promoting active international engagement by the United States. Founded in 1910, its work is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results.

Following its century-long practice of changing as global circumstances change, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is undertaking a fundamental redefinition of its role and mission. Carnegie aims to transform itself from a think tank on international issues to the first truly multinational—ultimately global—think tank. The Endowment has added operations in Beijing, Beirut, and Brussels to its existing centers in Washington and Moscow. These five locations include the two centers of world governance and the three places whose political evolution and international policies will most determine the near-term possibilities for international peace and economic advance.

**Carnegie Endowment
for International Peace**

1779 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
United States
Phone: 202.483.7600
Fax: 202.483.1840
www.CarnegieEndowment.org
info@CarnegieEndowment.org

Carnegie Moscow Center

Tverskaya, 16/2
125009, Moscow
Russia
Phone: 495.935.8904
Fax: 495.935.8906
www.Carnegie.ru
info@Carnegie.ru

**Carnegie-China Reform
Forum Joint Program**

Room 513, Chang Xin Building
39 Anding Road, Chaoyang District
Beijing, 100029
China
Phone: 86.10.6443.6667 ext. 627
Fax: 86.10.6894.6780

Carnegie Middle East Center

Emir Bashir Street, Lazariah Tower,
Bloc A, Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
P.O. Box 11-1061
Downtown Beirut
Lebanon
Phone: 961.1.99.14.91
Fax: 961.1.99.15.91
www.Carnegie-mec.org
info@Carnegie-mec.org

Carnegie Europe

Avenue d'Auderghem, 82
1040 Brussels, Belgium
Phone: 32.2.735.56.50
Fax: 32.2.736.62.22
www.CarnegieEurope.eu
brussels@ceip.org

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

WASHINGTON DC ▪ MOSCOW ▪ BEIJING ▪ BEIRUT ▪ BRUSSELS