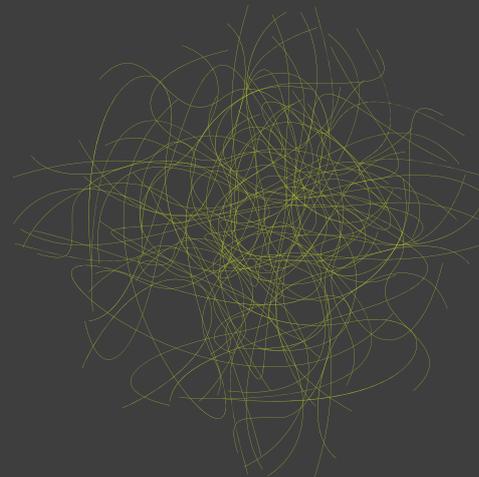


**Sources of Tension
in Afghanistan and
Pakistan: A Regional
Perspective**

**Russia's
Concerns
Relating to
Afghanistan and
the Broader
Region in the
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RUSSIA'S CONCERNS RELATING TO AFGHANISTAN AND THE BROADER REGION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE US/NATO WITHDRAWAL

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The departure of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces and most United States (US) forces from Afghanistan leaves behind a weak and poorly functioning state, a high level of instability, continuing insurgent and other violence and an opium economy much larger in size than it was a decade ago. On the one hand, this raises serious concerns among the states of the region and powers adjacent to the region, including Russia, about potential repercussions of the US/NATO withdrawal for regional stability. On the other, the withdrawal of foreign military forces may in fact open the way for real negotiations on the intra-Afghan political settlement.

The prospect of the speedy US/NATO withdrawal and of the possible decline in much of the US/NATO interest in Afghanistan elevates the importance of the broader regional dimension of the situation in Afghanistan. This should not imply 'putting the cart before the horse': the central dimension of the Afghan problem remains the need for a national intra-Afghan political settlement— which cannot be reduced to little but a function of the interests of regional powers. Even some kind of balance between the interests of the regional powers cannot be a substitute for a genuine political settlement in Afghanistan.

However, the regional dimension of what remains the largest security problem at the intersection of Southwest, South and Central Asia is critical for dealing with the political, security and economic implications of the situation in Afghanistan after 2014 for each of these regions. It will also play a major role in any political power-sharing process between the Afghan parties.

1. The Regional Dimension

The regional dimension in relation to Afghanistan represents a variety of state actors and a web of international frameworks. The Russian Federation is neither central, nor marginal to this regional mosaic. As a starting point, it may be useful to disaggregate the regional dimension of the Afghanistan problem into three tiers of state actors and international frameworks, depending on their relevance to, and leverage on, the situation and conflict management in Afghanistan. These tiers are listed in a declining order of importance.

First Tier: Pakistan & Iran

The first tier is formed by two neighbouring regional powers that are both most directly affected by the situation and have the greatest influence in parts of Afghanistan – Pakistan and Iran.

Both Pakistan's long-term strategic interests in Afghanistan (long predating the conflict between the US/NATO forces and the Taliban) and the role of Pakistan-based forces, including segments of security apparatus, in supporting the Afghan Taliban have been analysed in detail.¹ In the late 2000s, the growing US' concern' about Pakistani meddling in Afghanistan correlating with the escalation of the insurgency was largely moderated by other Pakistan-related, mostly anti-terrorism, concerns. Since 2011, as Washington started to consider 'exit options', it started to openly blame much of the US/NATO troubles in Afghanistan on Pakistan-based forces, while Islamabad repeatedly limited or stopped US/NATO transit, including in protest at US drone attacks on its territory. The US pressure on Pakistan appears to understate the latter' sown security effort in insurgency-affected areas along the Afghan border. Pakistan's counter-insurgency campaign involves the sustained deployment of almost 150,000 forces, comparable to the size of the Western deployments in Afghanistan, has resulted in similar human losses since 2001 and is part of Islamabad's broader 'stick and carrot' stabilisation strategy. However, the deterioration in US-Pakistan relations in the early 2010s hardly changes Pakistan's paramount importance vis-à-vis Afghanistan, including in economic terms- (Pakistan alone accounts for almost 40 percent of Afghan exports) - and in terms of facilitating any national intra-Afghan settlement involving the Taliban.

The consequences of conflict and instability in Afghanistan placed a high burden on Iran, especially in terms of flows of narcotics and refugees/illegal migrants. Tehran promotes its interests in Afghanistan primarily through the use of 'soft power', especially in its areas of traditional influence and cultural/language/religious proximity, and is concerned about any 'disproportionate' rise of the Taliban.² With the second Obama administration in place, the prospect of some positive shift in US-Iran relations – and perhaps even a certain US-Iran rapprochement on Afghanistan (which they are both ready to separate from other bilateral issues)– increases. Iran has publicly confirmed that it is *"ready to assist in the face-saving and low-cost withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan"* and to negotiate with the Americans on this, with the participation of the Afghans, even as Tehran rules out acceptance of any US bases in Afghanistan.³

While any Afghan power-sharing arrangement cannot satisfy each and every regional player, it should at least try to accommodate some of the key legitimate concerns of Pakistan and Iran as the two most relevant regional stakeholders.

Second Tier: China, India, Central Asia, Russia

The second tier is a multi-layered one. At the top are Afghanistan's two other influential large neighbours – China and India. While China keeps a relatively low political profile, it emerges as one of the key external economic players and investors. India has long-term strategic interests in Afghanistan, including those intended to balance the Pakistani influence.

1. Jones S., "Pakistan's dangerous game", *Survival*, vol. 49, no. 1 (spring 2007), pp. 15–32; Waldman M., *The Sun in the Sky: The Relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan Insurgents*, London School of Economics Crisis States Research Centre Paper no. 18 (2011) etc.
2. Samad O., *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan after the US Pull-Out*, The Iran Primer, US Institute of Peace, 17 Jan. 2013; Stepanova E., *Iran and Afghanistan: Cross-Border Security Challenges, Conflict Management, and Iran-US Relations*, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo no. 56 (Washington DC: Georgetown Univ., 2009).
3. Hossein Sheikholeslam, advisor on international affairs to the Speaker of the Iranian Majlis, quoted in: "Iran ready to assist US in face-saving withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Tehran Times* (6 Jan. 2013).

It is both an active political player/mediator and an economic stakeholder with significant potential.

The Central Asian neighbour-states follow suit, although it is important to differentiate between them. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are economically weak and, on some accounts, comparable to Afghanistan itself. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have relatively more robust states and economies and do engage in economic cooperation with Afghanistan. Uzbekistan in fact accounts for the largest share (over 21 percent) of imports to Afghanistan - significantly outmatching both China and Pakistan in that respect.⁴ In addition, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have all maintained informal political/security ties to regions in northern/northeastern Afghanistan dominated by their ethnic kin and with respective former Northern Alliance factions. However, none of the Central Asian states can claim major political clout in Afghanistan at the national level and, in terms of influence, they lag behind other neighbours. The main way Afghanistan relates to Central Asia, as seen from this region, is through the effects of instability in Afghanistan, including a perceived threat of a larger spill-over in the post-2014 context. All the states of the region, to a varying degree, cooperate with the United States and/or its NATO partners on the transit of personnel/equipment from/to Afghanistan, as part of the Northern Distribution Network that has grown in importance for the Western allies, as the transit route via Pakistan became more problematic.

The bottom layer of the second tier is formed by countries adjacent to the region around Afghanistan (such as Russia, Turkey or the UAE). These countries are, overall, less directly involved or affected. However, some of them have a degree of political influence in Afghanistan (e.g., Turkey or the UAE, especially in view of Qatar's role as facilitator of talks with the insurgency). Others may have minimal influence on the course of events inside Afghanistan (e.g., Russia is a far more important player in Central Asia than in Afghanistan), but have their own concerns about the situation. Russia's main concerns are about the potential for the growing 'export of instability' from Afghanistan to its Central Asian allies and the first-rate threat to its own society posed by the inflow of Afghan heroin.

Third Tier: Multilateral Frameworks

The third tier refers to multilateral regional formats relevant to the Afghanistan issue. While multilateral frameworks pertinent to Afghanistan are important, they tend to be easily overwhelmed, when necessary, by specific national interests or sometimes by bilateral deals. Hence, despite their varying size and degree of efficiency, multilateral formats belong to the last tier. The less institutionalized frameworks include trilateral summits (Afghanistan/Pakistan/Iran, Pakistan/Afghanistan/Turkey etc.); quartets (such as the 'Dushanbe Quartet' that includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia and Tajikistan); or the broad Contact Group on Afghanistan. There are also more institutionalized bodies such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Regional initiatives by international organisations, especially the United Nations (such as the trilateral counter-narcotics initiative under the auspices of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) or the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)-led 'Silk Road' programme) also belong to the third tier.

4. Trade and Economic Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Russian Ministry for Economic Development, 30 March 2012, <<http://govrdocs.ru/docs/26/index-207365.html>>.

In this three-tier regional configuration, Russia is one of several second-tier regional/extra-regional players who are affected by the developments in Afghanistan and have an interest in alleviating the 'Afghanistan problem'. Russia is hardly among the most important players, but nor is it the least important external stakeholder in Afghanistan. And this is likely to remain Russia's status after 2014 and in the longer term.

2. The Russia-Afghanistan Context

Russia's heavily troubled past in Afghanistan as well as its unique experience there, coupled with a long history of economic and security dominance in the neighbouring region of Central Asia, both define and constrain Russia's interests and policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, now as much as after 2014. This role should be primarily analysed in the economic and security context. Russia has some role to play in reconstruction and economic cooperation. It also provides limited security assistance to the Afghan government and has a genuine interest in the improved security and functionality of the state in Afghanistan, especially in view of its genuine security and counter-narcotics concerns.

Economic Cooperation

Russia's economic relations form the only aspect of these relations that is truly bilateral (at least in respect to trade), even if it is highly unequal. Economic cooperation is also the least controversial aspect in Russian-Afghan bilateral relations.

Trade and reconstruction cooperation was facilitated by Russia's consenting to write off more than US\$11bn of the Afghan Soviet-time debt in 2007. Economics was the main focus of President Karzai's first official visit to Moscow in January 2010, leading to the signing of a bilateral Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation. While the volume of bilateral trade reached 984.9m US\$ in 2011 (a 12-fold increase since 2004), it is almost completely dominated by Russian exports (by 96.8 percent). Afghanistan accounts for just 0.12 percent of Russia's foreign trade, while Russia accounts for 7.6 percent of Afghanistan's trade (closely following Iran, with 8.2 percent).⁵ Over 76 percent of the Russian exports are comprised of oil products (diesel fuel and gasoline), saw-timbers and steel. Afghan exports to Russia are dominated by agricultural products (such as raisins and potatoes), but include some machinery (e.g. turbo-jet engines).

Whilst apart from trade, Russia provides some training and humanitarian aid and has pledged some economic assistance to Afghanistan after 2014, so far, it has mainly claimed a piece of the international aid pie in exchange for technical expertise. In this respect, Russia has a limited, but natural niche to fill, and one which is hardly in conflict with the economic interests of any other states – the reconstruction of several of 142 Soviet-built objects.⁶ Top of the list are the Kabul house-building factory (Fabrik-e-Khanasazi) and the Jabul-Saraj cement plant.

Cooperation beyond trade and reconstruction is mostly confined to the energy sector and involves gas field studies projects and mini-hydropower stations and refineries construction. Russia also has a non-confrontational

5. Ibid.

6. "The list of main objects and projects on which the obligations of the USSR for technical assistance to Afghanistan was completed", Web-site of Alumni of the Russian Ministry of Defense's Military Institute of Foreign Languages and Military Institute/University: <<http://www.vkimo.com/node/222>>.

position on pipelines such as CASA and TAPI. The rest are mostly initiatives in railroad and other transport infrastructure development, and, to some extent, in mining and construction.

The bottom-line for Russia's economic role vis-à-vis Afghanistan is largely positive, although not without problems. Most projects are still at the stage of negotiations rather than implementation. Sub-contracting and aid prevail. Russia's economic plans and activity in Afghanistan are dominated by state-owned business, while Russian private investors have not shown major interest in Afghanistan. State support and subsidies to Russian companies working in Afghanistan lag far behind those offered by e.g. China to its business actors. Potential Russian private investors also want their interests to be protected by agreements that involve property rights – and those generally stand little chance with either the Afghan side or foreign donors.

On the one hand, Russia's economic cooperation with Afghanistan is likely to modestly expand, depending on security conditions after 2014. While Russian companies may lose in subcontracting in the likely case of reduced Western economic/reconstruction aid to Afghanistan after the NATO security presence ends, they might even gain if they are ready – as they often are in other insecure parts of the world – to more actively subcontract to the West for projects in certain parts of Afghanistan with a potentially more volatile context. On the other hand, the lion's share of Russia's economic attention, projects and investments in the broader region will be absorbed by Central Asia, not Afghanistan.

Security Cooperation: Still US/NATO-Centered

Russia's security policy and thinking on Afghanistan can hardly be primarily confined to a 'regional level', as they remain excessively US/NATO-centered and largely subordinate to the broader logic of Russia's relations with the United States and NATO. In fact, it was hardly Afghanistan *per se*, but rather the Western intervention there, that revived Russia's interest in the country since 2001.

For over a decade, Russia's concerns about the Western military presence in Afghanistan close to its 'privileged' sphere of interest in Central Asia were leveled off by the perceived need to rely on the US/NATO for ensuring at least some security and governance in Afghanistan, where Russia's own role and leverage is minimal and indirect. Any direct Russian military involvement or security operations in Afghanistan are ruled out – and will remain so after 2014. The taboo extends to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – a Russia-led security bloc with participation of all the Central Asian states except for Uzbekistan (since 2012) and Turkmenistan. CSTO Secretary-General Nikolai Borduzha has formally excluded any such involvement, noting that "*this option has not even been discussed and, hopefully, will never be*".⁷ While any speculations about the possibility of Russia getting dragged into security operations in Afghanistan lack substance, the political sensitivity of the issue is illustrated by the scandal raised by President Karzai about the presence of just two Russian drug enforcement agents in the 70-personnel US-Afghan counter-narcotics operation in eastern Afghanistan in October 2010.⁸

7. Quoted in: Nesavisimoye Voennoye Obzreniye (16 Nov. 2012).

8. Rubin A., "Karzai protests Russian agents in drug raid", The New York Times (30 Oct. 2010). Later, Karzai dropped his objections and Russian specialists took part in several similar US/NATO/Afghan counter-narcotics operations.

This permanent distance, however, has not precluded limited Russian security assistance to Afghanistan. Much of it hardly qualifies as 'bilateral' cooperation, as it has so far been largely done through – or fully coordinated with – the United States/NATO, accurately reflecting the lack of, or still incomplete, Afghan sovereignty over security matters. Russia has been training Afghan security officers, including counter-narcotics police, as part of a joint initiative with NATO, Central Asian states and Pakistan. As agreed with the US, Moscow also supplied arms, including the donation of small arms and munitions to the Afghan law enforcement sector. In 2010, Russia for the first time ever struck a deal directly with Pentagon for 21 MI-17B-5helicoptersfor the Afghan army: (this US\$375m contract has already been fulfilled); and in 2012, agreed to supply more. A special NATO-Russia trust fund has been established to provide technical support and training to the Afghan side in exploiting Russian-made helicopters.⁹

This is coupled with Russia's pragmatic, 'no love lost'-style cooperation with the US and other NATO states on the Afghan-related transit. Since the initial Russia-NATO arrangement that allowed the transportation of non-lethal supplies and the June 2010 US-Russia Agreement on Military Transit, cooperation has expanded to include more NATO partners and allow the use of Russian airspace to fly US troops in addition to overland routes, and of Ulyanovsk airfield in Central Russia as a transit centre. The transit is one of the few examples of mutually beneficial security cooperation between the United States/NATO and Russia, and reportedly brings Russian freight companies up to US\$/1bn year. This cooperation has not been impeded even by the new deterioration of US-Russia relations since late 2012: in April 2013 Russia offered NATO to consider the use of its Us't-Luga Baltic port for transit needs.

In sum, Russia's direct role vis-à-vis Afghanistan is very limited and confined to some economic cooperation, providing some support in arms, equipment and training to the Afghan security sector, and transit facilitation for US/NATO forces through Russian territory. While transit function will fade away after 2014, Russia's economic cooperation with Afghanistan may increase, depending on the security and political situation. Russia's security assistance to the Afghan government will need to acquire a more bilateral character and may also somewhat increase in the mid-term future.

The political, economic and security constraints to Russia's engagement in Afghanistan are of a fundamental and long-term nature and cannot be radically altered by the departure of the US/NATO forces. However, while Russia is bound to keep a distance from direct security involvement in Afghanistan, it has a genuine interest in improved security in Afghanistan. This interest partly stems from the potential repercussions of the post-2014security situation in Afghanistan for Central Asia, where Russia retains security and policy influence (see Section 3 below). This interest is also related to Moscow's concerns about the inflow of narcotics of Afghan origin– the largest security challenge from Afghanistan directly threatening Russia itself (addressed in Section 4). With the departure of most Western forces, the only path for improving security, or at least preventing a further deterioration of the volatile situation in Afghanistan, is through achieving a political settlement and improving the functionality of governance. Whether Russia is relevant – or can even modestly contribute – to these issues, is discussed in Section 5.

9. Even the Nov. 2012 recommendation by the US Senate for Pentagon to stop cooperation with Rosoboron export as a reaction to Russia's support to Syria's President Assad failed to derail the Afghan helicopter deal. "Russia and NATO will expand technical services for the Afghan helicopters," Lenta.ru, 24 Apr. 2013.

3. Russia's Concerns About the Implications for Central Asia of the Western Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Russia will keep a relative distance from Afghanistan as such even after 2014, to the extent of completely excluding any direct security engagement and preventing any other large-scale meddling. In contrast, Moscow's interest in and emphasis on Central Asia have been reactivated and will not only further grow, but also involve some important strategic shifts. In fact, for Russia, the main implications of the US/NATO withdrawal are not in Afghanistan, but in Central Asia.

The Threat of Militancy & Instability: How Much Spill-Over?

Russia itself is hardly directly threatened by militancy or terrorism from groups based in Afghanistan and areas of Pakistan along the Afghan border. Notwithstanding some previous influx of foreign 'jihadists' to Chechnya back in the 1990s – early 2000s, including from Afghanistan, and the possible presence of North Caucasian militants in other 'jihadi' theatres such as Afghanistan/Pakistan, any present speculations about potential connections are mostly unsubstantiated.¹⁰ Also, as the situation in Chechnya itself stabilised, the political need for the Kremlin to tie it to the US-led 'war on terrorism' in Afghanistan and elsewhere has declined. The present fragmented lower-scale violence in different parts of the North Caucasus is a complex, but predominantly domestic, phenomenon.

However, Moscow has voiced serious concerns about the potential effects of the post-2014 situation in Afghanistan on stability in Central Asia. The potential spill-over of instability and militancy from Afghanistan is seen by Central Asian governments, including Russia's security allies, as a major cross-border threat. While the Taliban-led insurgency poses no direct threat to Afghanistan's northern neighbours, overall instability in Afghanistan is likely to increase, the already weak central government in Kabul may further weaken, and cross-border trafficking, sporadic violence and further militarisation of northern Afghanistan may intensify. The scale of the spill-over threat though, should not be over-estimated. Violent rifts between Tajik government forces and some former commanders of the United Tajik Opposition in Rasht or Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region in 2010-2012 show that the spill-over of militancy and instability goes in both directions across the Tajik-Afghan border (not only from Afghanistan to Tajikistan, but also the other way round).¹¹

More importantly, the main sources of violence and instability in Central Asia are internal. The chief manifestations of non-state violence in Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan are disturbances on socio-political grounds and social protests that turn violent. These range from semi-chaotic and non-organised ones to those involving overlapping local social, business, and religious patronage networks (such as the 'Akromiyya' network in the 2005 Andijan crisis). There are also flashpoints of communal violence that in some cases amount to ethnic cleansing (e. g., the May 2010 Osh pogroms). Following the end of the civil war in 1997, the new rise of internal violence in Tajikistan's peripheral areas is primarily linked to the government's crackdown on the former opposition strongmen. Regardless of the source of unrest, this violence is routinely linked by governments of the region to (a) grass-root Islamists, especially the fol-

10. Stepanova E., "Islamist terrorism in the Caucasus and CentralAsia", in A. Schmidand G. Hindle (eds), *After the War on Terror: Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counter-terrorism Strategy* (London: RUSI, 2009), pp. 112–121; idem., "Afghanistan after 2014: The Way Forward for Russia", *Russie. NEI.Visions [Ifri]*, no. 71 (May 2013), pp. 8, 18-19.

11. Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats, Asia Report no. 205 (Bishkek/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2011); Tadjbaksh S., *Turf on the Roof of the World* (Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, 2012).

lowers of the underground *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* movement, which despite its name, is a largely homegrown phenomenon and emphasises propaganda and other non-violent means; and (b) external scapegoats, especially militants exiled from Central Asia who found refuge in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas.

Despite insufficient or speculative evidence on an Afghanistan-related 'spill-over effect' and a lack of solid international expertise on domestic sources of violence in Central Asia, the threat from 'external militants' has been systematically overrated by all Central Asian governments (but also, to an extent, by Russia, Pakistan and China). It is not clear how much of this overrating is accounted for by: (a) conspiracy-obsessed thinking widespread among the region's mostly autocratic rulers; (b) a degree of genuine concern about the cross-border factor as an additional complication in the case of major internal calamity (e.g. during the looming regime succession in Uzbekistan); or (c) manipulation of the 'cross-border' threat for domestic and foreign policy purposes. For Central Asian regimes, apart from blaming domestic unrest on external scapegoats, such purposes include attracting foreign security assistance. Russia emphasises the external threat from Afghanistan-based 'militants and terrorists' as one of the main justifications for its security presence in Central Asia and the need to reinforce the CSTO role.

Finally, despite a tendency to routinely link any violence in northern Afghanistan to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the picture is actually more complicated. Not all violence in northern Afghanistan is accounted for by remnants of militant exiles from Central Asia such as the IMU.

The IMU – the core of which had been formed in the course of the Tajik civil war by exiled Islamists from Uzbekistan – was pushed out of Tajikistan, following an end to the civil war, and suffered a major blow in northern Afghanistan from the Northern Alliance and the US-led military coalition in 2001. Several hundred remaining fighters relocated to Pakistan's 'tribal areas' where they tried to survive by serving as 'hired guns' and linking up with local militants.¹² Since 2007, the Pakistani government, under increased pressure from the United States on anti-terrorism grounds, tried to use 'the Uzbek card' to split the Taliban elements in the FATA and to blame local and cross-border violence primarily on 'foreigners' such as the IMU.¹³ While there was some influx of IMU remnants and splinter militants back to Afghanistan in late 2000s – early 2010s, as a result of tribal infighting in the FATA and of pressure by Pakistani government forces, this influx was not massive enough, given the overall limited numbers of IMU fighters, to solely account for the rise in violent incidents in northern Afghanistan after 2009. Nor is there strong evidence that such militant elements in northern Afghanistan still see Central Asia as their final destination.¹⁴

While the issue merits further research, the violent actors in the north appear to also include 'new' exiles from Central Asia, especially Tajikistan, as well as more crime/trafficking-oriented elements linked to local warlords. Finally, it may be particularly embarrassing for NATO or the former Northern Alliance factions to recognise the appearance, however limited and sporadic, of some Taliban-affiliated elements in parts of the once Taliban-free north.¹⁵

12. Van der Schriek D., "The IMU: fish in search of a sea," Eurasianet.org, 14 March 2005; Mirsayitov I., "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan: development stages and its present state," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, vol. 42, no. 6 (2006), pp. 110–114.
13. Usher G., "The tribes' revolt", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 840, April 2008.
14. Anzalone C., "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan: down but not out", *Foreign Policy (The AfPak Channel)*, 20 Nov. 2012; Kucera J., "What are the IMU's designs in Central Asia?" EurasiaNet.org, 11 Dec. 2012.
15. See Giustozzi A. and Reuter C., *The Insurgents of the Afghan North: The Rise of the Taleban, the Self-Abandonment of the Afghan Government and the Effects of ISAF's 'Capture and Kill' Campaign*, *Afghan Analysts Network Thematic Report 04/2011*.

Ironically, this might partly explain why the “IMU threat” from northern Afghanistan to Central Asia appears to also be overestimated by the United States and NATO. In addition, a degree of manipulation may also be taking place, as the hyped ‘spill-over effect’ may be instrumentalised to facilitate and justify temporary expansion of Western ‘back-up’ military presence in Central Asia and, for that aim, to serve as a most convenient pretext to re-establish cordial relations with Uzbekistan’s regime.

Concerns About the US/NATO Presence in Central Asia

As 2014 nears, Russia has become increasingly concerned not only about the potential spill-over of instability from Afghanistan, but also about a relative expansion of the US/NATO security presence in Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Plans for a NATO base and transit/training centres are under discussion with Tashkent and Dushanbe, and NATO has already opened its regional office in Tashkent on 3 June 2013.¹⁶ In exchange for Tashkent’s security cooperation (e.g., for becoming the main hub for the Northern Distribution Network since 2009), the United States and the European Union lifted sanctions imposed on Uzbekistan for its brutal handling of the 2005 Andijan crisis. The US/NATO forces are also ready to leave a significant share of their arms and equipment withdrawn from Afghanistan for the use of the Uzbek and Tajik governments.

The main US interest in expanding a security presence in Central Asia is to back up its remaining security presence in Afghanistan and ensure uninterrupted transit through the Northern Distribution Network (which Russia partakes in providing). In addition, NATO member-states, including the United States, are naturally tempted to use this back-up/transit/exit-linked presence to keep an extra eye on both Russia and China in the region. The Russian security and defense establishment, from its side, is extremely suspicious about perceived longer-term/underlying motives and goals behind the relative expansion of the US presence in Central Asia, seen by some as a trigger for a new strategic rivalry in the region.

These concerns increased in view of Uzbekistan’s withdrawal from CSTO in June 2012 (its previous withdrawal lasted from 1999 to 2006), coupled with Tashkent’s rapprochement with the West following a bitter freeze in US-Uzbek relations provoked by the Andijan massacre. By shifting its focus from CSTO to the US/NATO Tashkent wants to make the most of the renewed US interest in the region, in line with Karimov’s ambitions for regional leadership. In any ‘Eurasian’ integration framework, Uzbekistan is doomed to play a role secondary to that of Russia and Kazakhstan. It also hopes to benefit from receiving a share of Western arms and equipment withdrawn from Afghanistan.

The implications of US-Uzbek cooperation on Afghanistan and of Uzbekistan’s withdrawal from CSTO for Central Asia and Russia’s interests in the region are ambiguous. On the one hand, this limits the CSTO regional reach. On the other hand, Karimov’s leaning towards the West, and especially the influx of Western arms, raise additional concerns on the part of neighbouring Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which may exacerbate their already existing tensions with Uzbekistan and, in fact, push them even closer to CSTO and Russia. In a way, Tashkent’s decision fixes

16. Such as the US-backed military/anti-terrorism training centre in Fakhhrabad, Tajikistan.

an already half-established pattern, relieving CSTO from the multiple caveats demanded by Tashkent; improves internal political cohesion at CSTO; frees Russia from the obligation of directly supporting the Karimov regime in case of its disintegration; and, last but not least, may well be reversed in the post-Karimov period.

Overall, a projection of Russia–US/NATO relations to the region will remain a dialectic combination of limited pragmatic cooperation on select issues (such as transit) with a strong degree of mutual suspicion, reinforced for Russia by whatever security presence the United States and its NATO partners plan to keep in Central Asia after 2014. In the longer term, however, after the departure of most Western forces from Afghanistan, Washington’s security influence in Central Asia is bound to gradually decline and may not be comparable to the influence exercised by Moscow (in security affairs), or Beijing (in economics).

US/NATO Withdrawal from Afghanistan as a Catalyst for Russia’s Strategic Shift in Central Asia

A combination of Russia’s concerns about regional destabilisation in view of the US/NATO forces departure from Afghanistan in the absence of either a political or security solution, together with suspicions about the expansion of the US/NATO security presence in Central Asia, catalysed Russia’s renewed emphasis on Central Asia. This implies not only a more active policy, but also a certain strategic shift that involves:

- ***A stronger emphasis on bilateral ties with CSTO/client states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.*** The first main change is Russia’s turn from a ‘region-wide’ approach to Central Asia as Moscow’s sphere of broad security interests and blurred responsibilities to closer and more substantive ties with client states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while assuming greater responsibility for their security. The second change is to expand security assistance and leverage (pledging US\$1bn in military assistance to Kyrgyzstan and another US\$200m to Tajikistan and finalising bilateral agreements on Russian military bases and facilities), but also to reinforce it by major economic and development leverage (especially in the energy/hydropower sector). Both changes have been underscored by President Putin’s visits to the two republics in the fall of 2012.¹⁷
- ***Upgrading and consolidating CSTO; further regionalization of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).*** In Central Asia, Russia’s new preference for a more cohesive and focused security bloc in Central Asia with fewer members¹⁸ is partly a recognition of strategic realities. They include the general vacuum – not a surplus – of power in the region (exacerbated by the upcoming succession dilemmas in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and uncertainty about external security leverage and guarantees) and the Central Asian states’ increasingly sophisticated ability to manipulate external players against one another to gain something from the competition between them. In the broader region including China and the north of South Asia, Russia supports the broad inclusive nature of the SCO where it backed Afghanistan’s observer status and promotes antiterrorism and counter-narcotics agendas.

¹⁷ For more detail on types of arms to be delivered and on base arrangements, see Ivanov S., “Pretenders to the role of peace guarantors in Central Asia”, in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (28 Dec. 2012).

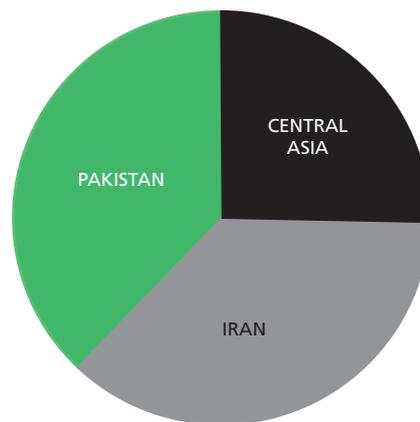
¹⁸ See also Cooley A. and Laruelle M., *The Changing Logic of Russia’s Strategy in Central Asia: From Privileged Sphere to Divide and Rule?* PONARS Eurasia Policy memo, June 2013.

- **Promoting cooperation and free-trade regime with Kazakhstan as a privileged partner.** Kazakhstan's accession to the Customs Union with Russia and Belarus ties the three together as never before in the post-Soviet period, has long-term economic benefits and strengthens stability in the north of Central Asia. At the same time, the lifting of customs control on the world's longest land border between Russia and Kazakhstan poses new challenges along Kazakhstan's southern borders, including for counter-narcotics. Any premature extension of the Customs Union to states such as Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan would aggravate and multiply these challenges, overstretch the Union's capacity and undermine its advantages.

4. The Afghan Heroin Challenge to Russia

The only direct large-scale threat that Russian society faces from Afghanistan emanates from the deeply-embedded Afghan opium economy, with Central Asia as the main transit corridor to the Russian market. The Russian government has become increasingly aware of the gravity of this threat to Russian society and elevated its importance to a first-order security challenge rather than a secondary aspect to other threats such as terrorism.

Fig.1.Opiate Trafficking from Afghanistan, by Route, 2009 (% of volume)



Data source: UNOffice on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), World Drug Report 2011

It is in our view delusional to think that the US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan will lead to a catastrophe in the form of some radical rise in opiate production and trafficking – not because there is no catastrophe, but because the catastrophe has already happened in a creeping and gradual way. It has actually happened during the period when the United States and NATO have taken up responsibility for providing security in Afghanistan. In post-Taliban Afghanistan, opiate cultivation, production and export levels increased exponentially and far exceeded the levels under the Taliban back in the 1990s (Fig. 2–3). In 2007, cultivation reached an all-time historical peak (it was 25 times larger than in 2001 when it declined by 91 percent as a result of the Taliban ban on poppy cultivation); in 2012, cultivation was still 19 times larger than it had been under the Taliban in 2001.¹⁹

19. Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008 (Vienna: UNODC, 2008), p. 7; Afghanistan Opium Survey 2012: Summary Findings (Vienna: UNODC, 2012), p. 5.

The surge in Afghanistan's opium output did not affect all concerned parties in the same way. The states of the region and Russia suffered a heavier burden than the West. Trafficking via Central Asia accounts for a quarter of Afghan heroin exports – which is less than trafficking via Pakistan or Iran – 44 and 31 percent, respectively (see *Fig. 1*). However, for Russia, the most dramatic change concerns the structure and final destination of drug flows from Afghanistan. Over a relatively short period, Russia turned from a low-drug-use state, first, into a consumer/transit country for Afghan opiates, and then, in the 2000s, into the single largest country market for Afghan heroin.²⁰ It consumes 75-80 metric tons – almost as much as the whole of Europe – and suffers a 3-5 percent GDP loss from its narcotics problem (which is comparable to the size of the national health budget).²¹ 90 percent of heroin trafficked via the Northern route through Central Asia goes to one country – Russia – and now all of it stays in Russia. While the Russian hard narcotics market is overwhelmed by Afghan heroin, European markets are more diversified (opiate consumption stabilised, while the growing inflow of cocaine from South and Central America became a more pressing drug threat). For its part, the US is not even directly threatened by Afghan opiates. The different scale of threat partly explains the different degree of priority given to it by Russia and the US/NATO, whose main security priorities in Afghanistan remained anti-terrorism, counter-insurgency and stabilisation.

The United States and its NATO allies had their own reasons not to prioritise narcotics: they depended on cooperation from local warlords and allies, including those profiting from the drug business, and feared alienating this population segment in drug-producing areas. As a result, while Washington remains the largest counter-narcotics donor for Afghanistan, it views counter-narcotics mainly as a subsidiary to its counter-insurgency strategy, in the context of the Taliban funding. Overall, the US/NATO military presence in Afghanistan has been of limited relevance to the opium economy – and so will be their withdrawal. None of the three main factors that contributed to exponential growth of the Afghan opium economy since 2001 – the dysfunctionality of the Karzai government; a lack of sustainable economic alternatives for cash-based income in poppy-growing areas; and escalating armed conflict – is amenable to a military/security solution.

In recent years, the inflow of Afghan opiates to Russia and Europe has stabilised. But the Afghan opiate threat may well increase again in the coming years – not radically, but to some extent – both for neighbour-states and for the main end-markets (especially Russia and China). Of all the potential drivers of this increase, only one major risk factor is indirectly related to the US/NATO withdrawal – the risk of expanding cultivation in the main drug-producing regions in southern Afghanistan. By now foreign, mainly Western, agricultural assistance projects have made available more arable and irrigated land in southern Afghanistan than ever. After Western forces leave, there will be an inevitable decline in foreign agricultural and development assistance. This will make crop substitution unsustainable which, with a lack of access to markets and stable sources of cash income, will force the peasants to divert expanded arable land back to poppy cultivation.²²

This new risk in Afghanistan combines with other new risks along the Northern trafficking route. While trafficking routes from Afghanistan diversify to reach new markets in Asia and Africa, the Northern route

20. World Drug Report 2011 (New York: UNODC, 2011), pp. 72–73; *The Global Afghan Opium Trade* (Vienna: UNODC, 2011), p. 44.

21. “Patrushev: “Damage from narcotics in Russia equals 3-5% of GDP,” *Novosti Mail.ru*, 25 Feb. 2013.

22. *The Afghan Narcotrafficking: A Joint Threat Assessment*. Report by the Joint US-Russia Working Group on Afghan Narcotrafficking (New York: East West Institute, 2013).

retains importance and even offers expanding opportunities for traffickers from cross-regional transportation/infrastructure development, the visa-free regime between Russia and the Central Asian states and new free-trade regime between Russia and Kazakhstan. These opportunities tend to develop faster than the counter-narcotics capacity of the Central Asian states.²³ For most states along the Northern route, the risks are exacerbated by low state functionality and worse socio-economic conditions than those of the main transit states of the Balkan route to Europe (Iran and Turkey). In the worst-case scenario, some of Afghanistan's surplus opiate output will not only go to new destinations in Asia and Africa, but also be reoriented from the more traditional 'Balkan route' to the Northern Route, leading to a new increase in consumption in Russia, or even turning it back into a transit state for Afghan opiates to Europe.

Fig. 2. Opium Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan, (hectares) 1994–2012

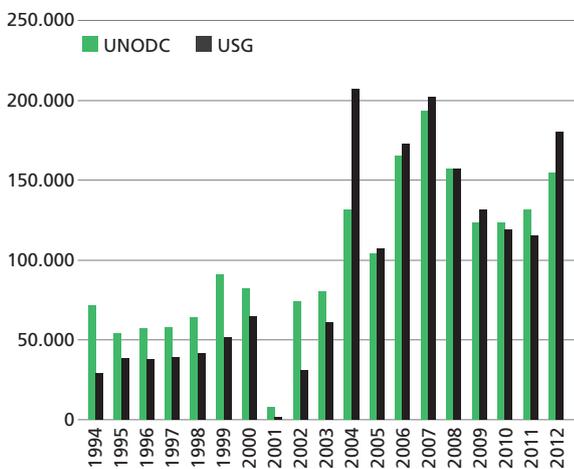
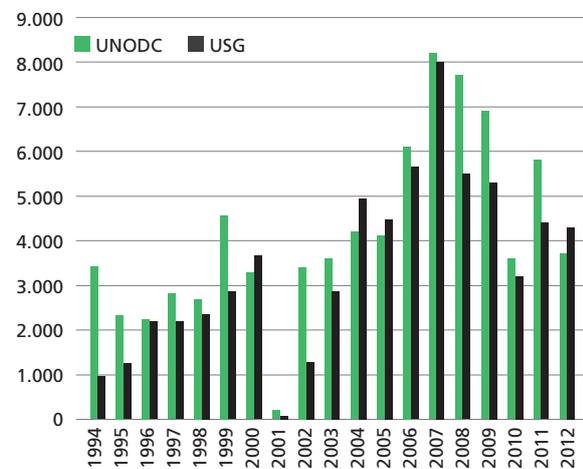


Fig. 3. Opium Production in Afghanistan, (metric tons) 1994–2012



Data sources: UNODC Afghanistan Opium Surveys; International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports, Department of State, US Government (USG)

As the US and NATO withdraw their forces from Afghanistan, Russia insists that the main centre of gravity of the Afghan narcotics problem remains at the source of the problem (Afghanistan). As Russia does not have direct security access to the source country for heroin in its market, it has to rely on whatever security capacity is available inside Afghanistan to undertake/support counter-narcotics there. At the same time, Russia hardly welcomes any attempts to use counter-narcotics as a 'cover' or 'pretext' for a larger security role for the West in Central Asia and strongly prefers a regional 'division of labor' in countering narcotics of Afghan origin. Moscow would like the United States to concentrate on Afghanistan itself (where Washington will remain the main external security actor for an indeterminate period after 2014). That may involve continuing or even expanding direct US counter-narcotics assistance to Afghanistan, promoting economic development with the specific goal of creating sustainable licit alternative sources of cash income and improving basic functionality of governance. Russia, in turn, could concentrate more on the Central Asian trafficking route; increase counter-narcotics support to its Central Asian partners; promote greater regional cooperation on this issue (both on multilateral and bilateral levels, especially with

23. Ibid., p. 46.

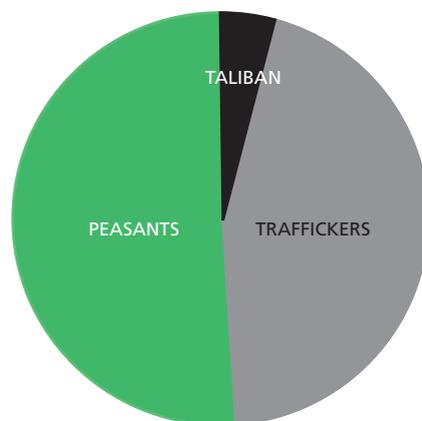
Pakistan and Iran); and do more on its own domestic demand-reduction and law enforcement measures.

A more fundamental question, however, is whether counter-narcotics can ever succeed in Afghanistan while the state is unable to establish even a minimally functional presence in much of the country. History evidences several cases of effective, significant reduction of illicit opium production (China, Thailand, Myanmar), but there are two main underlying conditions that need to be in place for any drug economy to be critically weakened. A combination of these two conditions is fundamentally more important than even the optimal combination of 'tough' and 'soft' counter-narcotics measures (which may vary even for different districts of the same province) or the scale of foreign counter-narcotics assistance.

The first condition is the availability of sustainable economic cash-generating alternatives (licit or illicit) or market conditions favourable to the decline of drug production in a particular region (even if such conditions are more like a temporary 'window of opportunity'). The temporary decline in Afghan opium cultivation in 2008-2009 partly resulted from a positive market correction: the global food crisis, rising wheat prices, and growing food insecurity of individual peasant households combined to produce a discernible shift to wheat cultivation, partly at the expense of poppy crops. A no less, or rather a more important, even indispensable, condition is the basic functionality of the state, including a form of functional governance in the main drug-producing/trafficking areas (that was in place in China, Myanmar, or Thailand, but absent in Afghanistan). For drug control and counter-narcotics purposes, the sheer functionality of governance (ability to control and access territory, establish relatively non-confrontational relations with the population, exercise basic law and order functions) is more important than the exact type, political or ideological orientation of governance.

Russia's earlier tendency to grossly overestimate the threat posed by Afghanistan-based militant/terrorist groups to its own security and to link Afghanistan's drug problem mainly to the Taliban has gradually given way to a more adequate, balanced and better-informed approach.

Fig. 4. Opium production & Trade Profit Distribution Inside Afghanistan, by Actor, 2010 (%)



Data sources: UNODC Afghanistan Opium Survey 2011; UNODC, The Global Afghan Opiate Trade: A Threat Assessment 2011.

As noted above, the narcotics threat started to be seen by the Russian Government as a challenge of its own merit, at least as important as terrorism. Furthermore, Moscow no longer one-sidedly conflates drugs with the insurgency/terrorism in Afghanistan. Russia's top drug control officials are fully aware not only of the fact, but also of the limits of the relationship between the Taliban and drugs and have publicly acknowledged that the Taliban is not the main beneficiary of drugs profits even within Afghanistan. It is, in fact, a minority beneficiary compared to other actors, and a negligible beneficiary compared to some US\$60-65bn in global profits from Afghan opiates. Calculations based on the best available statistics and field research estimate the Taliban's annual drug-related income at US\$ 140–170m, or no more than 6.5 percent of the total net value of the Afghan opium economy in 2011 (US\$2.6 bn), of which poppy-growing farmers earn US\$ 1.4 bn and traders and traffickers based inside Afghanistan earn the remaining US\$1.2bn):²⁴ see Fig. 4. Overall, the Taliban get more funding from other sources than from drugs (e. g., from collecting Islamic taxes on licit property and economic activity; taxing gems and timber smuggled across the Afghan-Pakistani border; demanding protection money from local businesses; and receiving donations from sympathisers in the Gulf states and various actors in Pakistan).²⁵ Plus, only half of all heroin that goes through the Northern route originates in the south of Afghanistan where the Taliban positions are strong –the other half of the Northern route's heroin supply is manufactured in labs based in northern Afghanistan from locally grown opium.²⁶

The sharp contrast between the unprecedented decline in opiate output in 2001 under the Taliban ban and skyrocketing cultivation and opium production in post-Taliban Afghanistan (see Figs. 2 and 3) may generate a counter-intuitive idea: as US/NATO forces depart and the Taliban establishes a more functional and less corrupt *de facto* governance in the drug-producing south, the Taliban might be able - or be induced - to limit poppy cultivation, if not reproduce the success of the 2000 ban. However, such hopes are dim for the near-term future. The Taliban are undoubtedly capable of providing minimal security and some functional governance in the south, but, in contrast to the late 1990s, they are not in a position now to afford confrontational measures against the peasants, including poppy-growers. The peasants, in turn, will inevitably turn to expanded poppy cultivation for socio-economic reasons (lack of cash-based alternatives, decline in Western alternative development aid and availability of more arable land than ever). This does not mean that the issue of inducing the Taliban to cooperate on narcotics control is closed. It is in Russia's interest that it is re-opened later, with or by whoever has the leverage on that movement (e.g. Pakistan).

24. The Afghan Narcotrafficking: A Joint Threat Assessment. Op. cit., pp. 40, 22.

25. Ibid, p. 40; Whitlock C., "Diverse Sources Fund Insurgency In Afghanistan", The Washington Post, 27 Sept. 2009; Collins C. and Ali A., "Financing the Taliban," New America Foundation, 19 Apr. 2010.

26. Opiate Flows Through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Threat Assessment (UNODC, 2012), p. 21.

5. Towards Political Settlement in Afghanistan: Is There a Role for Russia?

After 2014, both end-consumers of Afghan heroin such as Russia and transit countries will need to rely on whatever governance will be in place in Afghanistan for drug control and counter-narcotics measures at the source. But, as foreign forces leave, the central government in Kabul stands little chance of establishing even basic control either in the main drug-producing areas in the south or in major manufacturing areas in the north. So Russia has a very pragmatic and genuine interest in supporting

any political solution for Afghanistan that could improve governance capacity, i. e., increase the functionality and legitimacy of the Afghan state. In areas where the drug economy is compounded by an ongoing, protracted armed conflict, there is no solution to the drug problem without a solution to the conflict. As long as the armed confrontation continues, it both impedes central state access to the areas affected by drugs and conflict and complicates the functioning of any de facto governance structures (i.e. run by the insurgency). In addition, in the absence of functional governance, neither tough, nor soft counter-narcotics and drug control measures, neither 'security' nor 'development' solutions, nor even a combination of the two, will work.

Against this background, Russia has a very genuine interest in supporting any kind of political solution for Afghanistan that could bring relative stabilisation (in terms of the end of a major armed conflict) and increase the functionality of the Afghan state. And this hinges upon progress towards a political settlement and power-sharing between all major veto players in post-2014 Afghanistan, including the insurgency.

Of all the regional and other external stakeholders, Russia has probably shown the most cautious and wait-and-see approach vis-à-vis the intra-Afghan political process and potential power-sharing arrangement. At the official level, this approach boils down to general calls for peace, stability and a UN lead for any international peacemaking framework. As reaffirmed by Russia's Special Representative on Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov "*Moscow takes the dialogue with the Taliban normally*" and "*supports national reconciliation process in Afghanistan, but it should be led and conducted by the Afghans*" and "*strictly meet*" three routinely repeated conditions: laying down arms, recognising the 2004 Afghan Constitution and severing all ties to al-Qaeda.²⁷ Needless to say that, while the latter condition is plausible, the former two appear quite unrealistic.

While Russia is not going to be a decisive player or major facilitator in the intra-Afghan political/peace process, this does not mean, however, that there is nothing that Russia can do to directly or indirectly facilitate this process. At a broader international level, Russia retains one specific leverage which, of all regional actors on Afghanistan, only China also enjoys – namely, its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and, hence, having a formal say on the problem of an international mandate for the follow-up post-2014 security presence in Afghanistan. While room for manoeuvre on this issue is limited by the fact that no one is ready to replace the US forces as the core of any follow-up mission, there are also serious repercussions for the US in a non-mandated presence that may be formed on a bilateral basis, but which would lack international legitimacy (as would any Russian cooperation with the US on transit).²⁸ Consequently, Russia could actually lead the efforts at the UNSC to strike a balance between the UN dependence on the United States for some security presence in Afghanistan after 2014 and attempts to frame this presence in a way that facilitates, rather than complicates, the Afghan-led national political/peace process. In the same way, but less formally, Russia could quietly continue to instrumentalise its UNSC role, if and when required by the dynamics of the intra-Afghan political process, regarding select Taliban members on the UNSC 'al-Qaida and Taliban' Sanctions Committee list.

27. Interview by Special Representative of the Russian President on Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov to "Kommersant" newspaper, 25 Apr. 2013.

28. Ibid.; see also Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov's statement at the Istanbul Process conference in Almaty, 26 Apr. 2013, quoted in: Tarasenko P. and Chernenko E., "Russia reconciles Afghanistan with reality", News.mail.ru, 27 Apr. 2013.

Due to Russia's need to support any political solution that could increase the functionality and legitimacy of the Afghan state, its approach to political settlement should continue to evolve towards becoming less ideological (and less anti-Islamist in particular) and more pragmatic. In this context, Russia could undertake some indirect and less formal efforts in relation to the main Afghan stakeholders.

Firstly, Russia has no leverage over the Taliban (and any direct contact could jeopardise relations with other, particularly northern, Afghan factions). However, Moscow could more actively reach out to Pakistan as an actor with access to the Afghan Taliban. Unlike Russia, Pakistan is a 'first-rate' regional actor on Afghanistan, with major leverage there and a key role to play in any potential settlement. Hence, it becomes an increasingly important partner – and potential interlocutor – for Russia in any future attempts to promote the counter-narcotics agenda with whoever – *de facto* or *de jure* – exercises a degree of control over Afghanistan's main drug-producing areas (including through offering economic and development assistance to the south in compensation). Russia's present relative rapprochement with Pakistan (both at the bilateral level and as part of multilateral frameworks such as the Dushanbe Quartet or SCO) is thus a most welcome development, especially – but not solely – in view of the situation in Afghanistan. This rapprochement is also facilitated by Islamabad's deteriorating relations with Washington and may also be to some extent driven by Russia's interest in developing its own channels of communication with Pakistan, particularly in view of growing Chinese influence on the latter.

Secondly, the Taliban factor is the larger of the two main intra-Afghan stumbling blocks on the way to progress towards a national power-sharing arrangement. The other stumbling block is the northerners' reluctance to accept the Taliban as an integral part of the peace deal. Russia has a record of informally supporting the Northern Alliance factions with arms, munitions and equipment during and even before the 2001 U.S.-led intervention²⁹ (despite fierce confrontation with them during the Soviet intervention in the 1980s). It keeps contacts and may even retain some leverage with the Northern Alliance successors.³⁰ One thing Russia could consider is to try to push the former Northern Alliance parties towards accepting a national power-sharing arrangement involving elements of the Taliban-led insurgency. At the same time, it could offer additional, formal or informal, support to the northerners (preferably in concert with other states of the region, such as Iran, India and Central Asian partners), to partly alleviate their not entirely ungrounded concerns about the potential effects of building a national governance system with the participation of the Taliban.

29. Foreign Minister of the Islamic State of Afghanistan Dr Abdullah, quoted in: "The Northern alliance counts upon growing support from Russia and Iran," Newsru.com, 3 Oct. 2001.

30. Serenko A., "The new "Northern alliance" will seek allies in the Delhi-Moscow-Ankara triangle", Afghanistan.ru, 5 Jan. 2012.

6. Conclusions

In view of the US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia has started to –and it is considered, will further upgrade– its security presence and economic cooperation with Central Asia. It will, however, remain a second-tier actor vis-à-vis Afghanistan, as such. Russia has some identifiable interests and a limited role to play vis-à-vis the latter (especially in economic cooperation with and security assistance to the

Afghan government). Russia is, however, much less involved or concerned than first-tier regional powers such as Pakistan and Iran and, in some respects, less engaged than such second-tier actors as China, India or Uzbekistan.

Interests & 'Red Lines'

This paper builds upon, but goes beyond, the list of Russia's regional interests and 'red lines' for Russia in relation to Afghanistan and Pakistan as identified by the CIDOB Mapping Document.³¹ The following interpretation of and order of priority for Russia's interests in and around Afghanistan is offered:

- Reducing the flow of heroin and other narcotics from Afghanistan (as the largest direct security challenge to Russia itself);
- Limiting the potential destabilisation effect of the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and border areas of Pakistan for Moscow's Central Asian allies and for the region as a whole;
- Avoiding a long-term post-2014 US military presence in Afghanistan and ensuring it is regulated by the UN Security Council mandate, while benefiting from the residual role of the US in guaranteeing basic security for the central Afghan government and encouraging continuing US support to counter-narcotics in Afghanistan;
- Preventing a long-term US security presence in Central Asia;
- Addressing the gravity of the Afghan narcotics threat for Russia and Moscow and concerns about the potential destabilising effects of a spill-over of militancy and terrorism from Afghanistan to Central Asia, which dictate Russia's genuine interest in improving the functionality and legitimacy of the Afghan state. Without it, neither Afghanistan's counter-narcotics efforts, nor its general security capacity, are likely to improve.
- Russia has a genuine interest in an end to the armed conflict and in a negotiated intra-Afghan political settlement, national power-sharing arrangement and reconciliation in Afghanistan as the essential conditions for improving the functionality and legitimacy of governance across Afghanistan.
- Russia is interested in promoting international development assistance to Afghanistan to help build a long-term alternative to the opium economy.

Consequently, for Russia, the following main 'red lines' in terms of potential sources of tensions related to Afghanistan and Pakistan may be identified (in declining order of priority):

- i. A new increase in the inflow of narcotics into the Russian territory;
- ii. Rising instability in Central Asia as a result of a spill-over of militancy and terrorism from Afghanistan and Pakistan;
- iii. A long-term US security presence in Central Asia beyond the Afghanistan-related needs;
- iv. A return to a major armed conflict inside Afghanistan impeding basic security and functionality of governance, including in the main drug-producing areas in the south and in transit / heroin manufacturing areas in the north of Afghanistan;
- v. Pakistan controlled by Islamist militants.

31. <<http://www.cidobafpakproject.com>>.

Policy Recommendations

1. Russia's security policy and thinking on Afghanistan remains overly US/NATO-centered. This is the main thing Russia will need to revise in its approach to post-2014 Afghanistan.
2. Russia should continue and consider expanding, to the extent possible, its economic cooperation with Afghanistan, especially in view of Moscow's interest in promoting long-term development in Afghanistan as a source of stability and sustainable economic alternatives to the opium economy.
3. In providing limited, but likely increased, security assistance to Afghanistan after 2014, Russia should seek to strike two critical balances:
 - i. **To provide some security support** to whatever Afghan government is in place after 2014 (as and if requested), especially in view of Russia's counter-narcotics concerns, without being dragged into any formal or informal direct security presence in Afghanistan.
 - ii. **A balance needs to be struck by all international stakeholders** on Afghanistan: to increase security support to the Afghan state, but in a way that helps the government to ensure some post-2014 military/security balance (as a condition to push the Taliban to negotiate a national power-sharing arrangement) and to ensure the security of minorities, rather than contributes to continuing armed confrontation between the central government and the Islamist insurgency.
4. While Russia will not play a lead role in facilitating a political settlement in Afghanistan, it should continue to shift its focus towards a strong preference for a broad national power-sharing solution over reliance on any specific Afghan allies.
 - i. Russia may consider showing more flexibility in two areas:
 - a. In its official, but conditional support to the intra-Afghan settlement, regarding at least one of the three 'strict' conditions for the Taliban to meet, e.g. the acceptance of the 2004 Constitution. Russia should be prepared to recognise at some point that a sustainable power-sharing settlement in Afghanistan may require a major revamp of the existing constitutional system;
 - b. Regarding the UNSC 'Al-Qaida and Taliban' Sanctions Committee sanctions against some Taliban members whose de-listing may facilitate intra-Afghan peace negotiations after 2014.
 - ii. Using whatever leverage Russia may retain with the former Northern Alliance factions, it could try to pressure them towards a national political settlement with the Taliban, while (in concert with Iran, India and the Central Asian states) providing support to alleviate the northerners' concerns about the expansion of the Taliban rule beyond the south
5. In Central Asia, Russia should:
 - i. Give a calibrated assessment to security challenges posed to its allies (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) and to regional security as whole (including the stability of non-aligned states such as Uzbekistan) by developments in Afghanistan. For Russia, it is critical to avoid both excessive alarmism and hopes, if any, to renege on its CSTO security obligations in case of a major calamity (e. g. a domestic crisis in any state of the region potentially aggravated by inter-state tensions within Central Asia and/or some spill-over of militancy from Afghanistan);

- ii. Find a balance between concerns about potential spill-over of instability from Afghanistan to Central Asia and strategic concerns about the US/NATO presence in Central Asia formally linked to their remaining Afghanistan role.
6. In the broader region beyond Central Asia, Russia should intensify contacts and coordination on the Afghan problem with all concerned regional actors, but especially with the 'first-tier' regional powers – Pakistan and Iran – both at the bilateral level and through all available multilateral frameworks.

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