

## NOREF Article

### Russia, Afghanistan and the Great Game

Ross Eventon

#### Executive summary

In January this year Russian president Dmitry Medvedev publicly stated that Moscow would be taking a greater role in Afghanistan, increasing levels of military aid and the number of Afghan military personnel sent to Russia for training. These comments followed a visit to Russia by Afghan president Hamid Karzai and a year of Russian re-engagement with Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal in the early 1990s. While Moscow and Washington share an interest in supporting the Afghan government, a fierce battle for influence is emerging throughout the resource-rich region.

Moscow has actively courted President Karzai, and co-operation between the two countries now ranges from energy projects to weapons supplies and military training. Russia has

also attempted to draw Afghanistan into the fold of a regional body, the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, and has taken advantage of the drugs flow from Afghanistan to increase its engagement with Central Asian states. These developments have frustrated Washington, which appears determined to maintain a long-term role in the region and exert control over the supply of energy to South Asia.

How this power struggle plays out over the next few years will be crucial in determining the future of the region, as Washington attempts to maintain some form of presence and Moscow attempts to become an influential actor in Afghanistan and a competitor in the battle for Central Asia.

**Ross Eventon** was previously the Samuel Rubin Young Fellow at the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam where his research focused on the war in Afghanistan. He holds an MA in international relations and a BSc in economics. He is currently a writer and researcher based in Latin America.

In January this year Russian president Dmitry Medvedev publicly stated that Moscow would be taking a greater role in Afghanistan, increasing levels of military aid and the number of Afghan military personnel sent to Russia for training. These comments followed a visit to Russia by Afghan president Hamid Karzai and a year of Russian re-engagement with Afghanistan following the termination of relations after the Soviet withdrawal in the early 1990s.

During 2010 Moscow cancelled almost \$12 billion of Afghan debt and donated 20,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles and 2.5 million cartridges to the Afghan Interior Ministry. Russia also finalised a number of arms sales and energy agreements, including an economic co-operation agreement to increase levels of bilateral trade and an agreement to assist the country with a number of “priority economic projects” such as infrastructure development, hydroelectric dams and “affordable housing”.<sup>1</sup>

Reacting to Karzai’s trip to Russia, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan expressed frustration that the Afghan president had undertaken such an initiative without informing NATO members. This comment was evidence of how, despite their sharing a common interest in supporting the Afghan government, Moscow and Washington are engaged in a struggle for influence in Afghanistan.

### Shared interests

This relationship was epitomised by the recent agreement to supply 24 Russian helicopters to the Afghan army, to be paid for by the U.S. Moscow is particularly concerned about a return of the Taliban, fearing that it may influence militant Islamist groups in the Central Asian states. Maintaining sympathetic Tajik and Uzbek warlords in the northern Afghanistan border regions is therefore vitally important. These groups were armed by Russia in the 1990s to act as a buffer against the then-dominant Taliban. Although they are opposed to a long-term U.S. presence, Russian officials have

warned the U.S. against leaving the country before the Afghan army and police are ready to suppress the insurgency on their own.

For this reason, the Russian leadership is not applying significant pressure on the U.S. and NATO to alter their fundamental war strategy. One means of applying pressure would be by preventing supply transit flights over Russian territory; this route is becoming increasingly important for NATO, given the attacks along its southern supply route from Pakistan. However, Moscow’s envoy to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, has stated, “[w]e’re interested in the transit ourselves, so that the coalition acts without disruptions. We’re not going to shoot ourselves in the foot merely to spite them”.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, Russia and the U.S. are engaged in an active struggle for influence in Afghanistan and the wider region. Central Asia is a geostrategically significant part of the world, with Afghanistan’s importance lying in its location as a land bridge through which gas and oil from the Central Asian states can be transported to energy-starved South Asia. Control of these flows can bring significant rewards and have a profound effect on the balance of power in the region.

### Using the “drugs threat”

Russian domestic drugs policy is notoriously ineffectual and serves to exacerbate its drug-use epidemic. Instead of reforming its drugs law and addressing the issue of domestic drugs fatalities, Russia has opportunistically utilised the proliferation of Afghan opium that resulted from the U.S./NATO invasion as a means of engaging with Afghanistan and the wider region. Citing the “drugs threat” and the need to respond militarily, the Russian leadership has obtained agreements to construct military bases in Krygystan – with plans to set up bases along drugs routes in other regional countries – and to utilise the drugs issue in Central Asian states in much the same way as the “war on drugs” has facilitated the projection of U.S. power and influence in Latin America. Moscow is currently pressuring Tajikistan to allow around 3,000 Russian troops into the country to

1 Alexei Anishchuk, “Karzai courts Moscow with economic projects”, Reuters, January 21st 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/01/21/uk-russia-afghanistan-idUKTRE70K30020110121>; Amie Ferris-Rotman, “Russia eyes bigger role in Afghanistan, wants to rebuild: envoy”, Reuters, June 17th 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/17/us-afghanistan-russia-idUSTRE75G1PN20110617>.

2 Alexei Anishchuk, “Russia calls for crusade on Afghan drugs, US tepid”, Reuters, June 9th 2010, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2010/06/09/idINIndia-49176220100609>.

engage in “border defence”, ostensibly to assist in stopping the flow of drugs along the route. There have also been discussions to create counter-drugs units within the army that could operate outside the country in the same way as “the long-standing counter-drug operations conducted by the U.S. Armed Forces in Latin America”, according to Russian news agency RiaNovosti.<sup>3</sup>

Further afield, Moscow has increased its engagement on the drugs issue with China, and appears eager to identify common threats with the regional powerhouse in order to promote further co-operation. Following a visit to China with a delegation of security officials to discuss anti-narcotics co-operation, Viktor Ivanov, the head of the Federal Drug Control Service, expressed ambitious plans for the future when he stated, “Russia and China, by using the drug issue, should put their efforts together to stabilize the situation in Pakistan”.<sup>4</sup>

The U.S., while allowing the inclusion of Russian agents in drugs raids in Afghanistan, has rejected more-ambitious Russian proposals calling for more eradication. Afghan-led eradication continues in Afghanistan, but the U.S. has stated that it does not want to contribute to a repeat of the situation in which Afghan farmers were driven towards the insurgency following the destruction of their livelihoods.

## The Great Game

In September 2007 Richard Boucher, U.S. assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, stated: “One of our goals is to stabilize Afghanistan so it can become a conduit and hub between South and Central Asia so that energy can flow to the south ... and so that the countries of Central Asia are no longer bottled up between the two enormous powers of China and Russia, but rather that they have outlets to the south as well as to the north and the east and the west.”<sup>5</sup>

3 *Russia Times*, “Russia negotiates terms for military base in Kyrgyzstan”, February 5th 2011.

4 Anna Nemtsova and Owen Matthews, “Beefing up the Russia-China connection”, *Newsweek*, December 3rd 2010, [http://www.khaleejtimes.com/displayarticle.asp?xfile=data/opinion/2010/December/opinion\\_December41.xml&section=opinion&col=](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/displayarticle.asp?xfile=data/opinion/2010/December/opinion_December41.xml&section=opinion&col=)

5 Asad Ismi, “Russia, China, Iran defeat U.S. in the ‘pipeline wars’”, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, May 22nd 2010, <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/monitor/us-and-its-allies-foiled>.

To this end, the U.S. has supported the creation of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which will transport energy from the Caspian Sea area to South Asia, excluding Russia and bypassing Iran, the natural suppliers to the region. The pipeline, if constructed, would be an important step in the “consolidation of US political, military and economic influence in the strategic high plateau that overlooks Russia, Iran and China”, in the words of one political analyst.<sup>6</sup>

Russia recently reversed its stance regarding the TAPI pipeline and has offered to join the project, opting out of an Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline that analysts consider to have been scuppered after India pulled out following U.S. pressure. Russia’s decision appears to have followed the creation of the Kazakhstan-China pipeline, and the natural gas company Gazprom has now opened talks with Turkmenistan concerning the company’s involvement in the project. This would not only mean profits for Gazprom, but also greater Russian influence in Turkmenistan, where Russia is attempting to combat the creation of the U.S.- and European Union-supported Nabucco natural gas pipeline project. Supplied in part with gas from Turkmenistan, the proposed pipeline would connect Turkey and Austria in order to lessen European dependence on Russian energy.

China, for its part, developed the Kazakhstan pipeline under an agreement that included a provision stating that “Chinese interests” would not be “threatened from [Turkmenistan’s] territory by third parties”, a barely veiled reference to U.S. military installations in the Central Asian state.<sup>7</sup>

## Regional initiatives

The Shanghai Co-operation Organistan (SCO), which includes Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia, China, and Kazakhstan and may eventually contain a military component, is a vital mechanism for the Russian leadership to project power and counter the growing U.S. role in the region. U.S./

6 M. K. Bhadrakumar, “Pipeline project a new Silk Road”, *Asia Times Online*, December 16th 2010, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/LL16Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/LL16Df01.html).

7 Pepe Escobar, “Pipeline-istan: everything you need to know about oil, gas, Russia, China, Iran, Afghanistan and Obama”, *AlterNet*, May 13th 2009, [http://www.alternet.org/world/139983/pipeline-istan\\_everything\\_you\\_need\\_to\\_know\\_about\\_oil\\_gas\\_russia\\_china\\_iran\\_afghanistan\\_and\\_obama/](http://www.alternet.org/world/139983/pipeline-istan_everything_you_need_to_know_about_oil_gas_russia_china_iran_afghanistan_and_obama/).

NATO troop deployments now occur on the borders of both Iran (which has SCO observer status and is practically surrounded by U.S. bases and forces) and China.

The SCO is openly opposed to a long-term U.S. presence in Central Asia, but since 2001 the U.S. has acquired the use of former Soviet bases in Kyrgyzstan, rejecting SCO demands to put a deadline on this arrangement. Kyrgyzstan continues to receive monetary benefits for hosting this U.S. presence, but has restricted its activities. Washington is also attempting to re-engage with Uzbekistan following the expulsion of U.S. forces from an airbase in that country in 2005.

Reacting to these developments, Moscow and Beijing have co-operated to draw Afghanistan into the SCO fold. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov confirmed in May that Afghanistan had made a formal request for SCO observer status, an announcement that came closely on the heels of a four-day visit by the Afghan foreign minister to China. At an SCO summit in June, India and Pakistan, currently observer states, finalised their memberships and are expected to attain full membership shortly.

This is particularly worrying for Washington, which had a previous request for SCO observer status denied, has desperately tried to steer Karzai away from such alliances and is concerned with the growth of a powerful regional body that may undermine its influence.

With President Karzai in attendance, Russian president Medvedev used the occasion to announce that “Russia is calling for more intensive and deeper cooperation between the SCO and Afghanistan”. Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev added, “[i]t is possible that the SCO will assume responsibility for many issues in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of coalition forces in 2014”.<sup>8</sup> How this power struggle plays out over the next few years will be crucial in determining the future of the region, as Washington attempts to maintain some form of presence and Moscow attempts to become an influential actor in Afghanistan and a competitor in the struggle for Central Asia.

<sup>8</sup> Pepe Escobar, “Beijing and Moscow beyond the SCO summit”, Al Jazeera, June 22nd 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/06/2011620115216348413.html>.