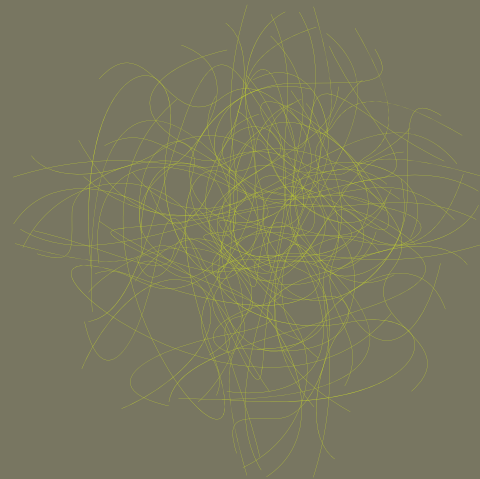


**Sources of Tension
in Afghanistan and
Pakistan: A Regional
Perspective**

**Perspectives
from the Region
in 2013:**

2. RUSSIA

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CIDOB STAP RP POLICY RESEARCH PROJECT THE "PERSPECTIVES FROM THE REGION IN 2013" SERIES

In line with the focus for 2013 under CIDOB's "Sources of Tension in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Regional Perspectives (STAP RP)" policy research project on the regional powers and their interests, this series is a product of field research visits to a number of key regional powers identified in the 2012 Mapping Document <http://www.cidobafpakproject.com> by the STAP RP project team.

Understanding the perspectives of the five main regional powers with an interest in outcomes in Afghanistan and Pakistan is a critical element in relation to this volatile region, which is currently in a state of flux as 2014 approaches. Identification of opportunities for dialogue, peace building, improved bilateral relationships and the development of regional organizations as mechanisms for dialogue, as well as examining how the regional powers see Afghanistan and Pakistan from a broader geopolitical and foreign policy perspective are key elements in enhancing this understanding.

This report is the product of a policy research visit to Moscow (May 27-31, 2013) by Roberto Toscano and Carmen Claudín. It is based upon a series of meetings with Russian experts as well as participation in the international conference "Complex Issues in the NATO-Russia Relations: Missile Defence, South Caucasus, Afghanistan" held at the Diplomatic Academy, Moscow, on May 27-28 2013.

Introduction

There is a general consensus that after 2014 Russia will be forced to play a more significant role in Afghanistan, although all our interlocutors went to great lengths to exclude the possibility of a military role.

What emerged (in particular during a NATO conference¹) was a complaint that, whereas the original international mandate for Afghanistan was broad, focusing on positive goals encompassing anti-narcotics, economic development, the justice system, etc., what actually took place was a total militarization of the international presence. Counter-insurgency, which should have been conceived as a means to secure the achievement of those positive goals, instead became an end in itself. After 2014, interlocutors considered that it will be necessary to correct this “*mission shift*”, with the international community playing a more positive and comprehensive role in sustaining Afghan stability. Russia is reportedly ready to play its part.

Regarding the international dimensions of the Afghan question, it was confirmed that for Moscow, Afghanistan is not only interesting in itself, but is also a significant testing ground for Russia’s constant demand for international recognition. Readiness to participate in the future of Afghanistan, in other words, does not only address direct Russian interests, it also constitutes a clear opportunity for Russia to show that it cannot be excluded as a main player in the international arena. (The complaint is widespread in the establishment’s perception that in the West, too many people are stuck in a Cold War paradigm toward Russia).

1. A Growing Awareness of What is at Stake in Afghanistan

Several experts complained of the lack of an overall, well developed “Afghan policy”. The fact that there are no overall government-to-government agreements between Russia and Pakistan, but only agreements on specific issues and sectors is a good example of this. There was, however, general agreement on the fact that, even without a truly comprehensive policy, it is not difficult to identify Russia’s concrete interests in relation to Afghanistan.

Indeed, opinions from many interlocutors were remarkably convergent on one essential point: that Russia has a long history of relations with Afghanistan, and in spite of the traumatic experience of the 1979 invasion and the ensuing conflict, it does not want – and cannot afford – to ignore or underestimate the importance of the country in terms of Russian national interests, which are mainly focused on regional stability and security. The fact is that Russia seems to be realizing that a post 2014 – Afghanistan could be the biggest source of instability and largest security threat since Chechnya, and that, in a sort of domino effect, extreme radicalization and a renewed conflict in Afghanistan could seriously affect territories from the Northern Caucasus to the Central Asian Republics.

1. NATO Conference on “Complex Issues in the NATO-Russia Relations: Missile Defence, South Caucasus, Afghanistan” held at the Diplomatic Academy, Moscow, May 27-28 2013

2. Narcotics

Different opinions were expressed on the relative priority of the drug problem, with some experts still ranking it as the main concern for the Russian Federation. One expert mentioned the fact that 8.5 million Russian citizens, in particular young people, are drug consumers (including both addicts and occasional users), so that the inflow of narcotics from Afghanistan can be considered a substantial threat to Russian society – one that might even increase in case the international community decides to reduce its financial support to Afghanistan, should the Taliban return to government. This implies that a total or partial Taliban government in Kabul could result in a drop in international assistance after 2014, making revenue from drugs even more vital. Whilst most interlocutors did not underestimate the gravity of the problem, some considered that the eventual trans-border projection of violent Islamist radicalism should be considered as by far the main threat - both for Central Asian countries and Russia.

On the issue of Afghan-produced narcotics, one particular expert expressed scepticism on the effectiveness of border controls or even eradication campaigns within Afghanistan, pointing out that the only way to fight that true social scourge would be through a reduction of demand in consumer countries.

3. Maintaining Stability in Central Asia: A Russian Priority

Most experts agreed that after 2014, concerted international efforts should be undertaken – through both economic and security means - to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a source of instability for its neighbours. More specifically, Russia is mainly concerned about Central Asia, so much so that one expert went so far as to describe Russia's interest in Afghanistan as a "*derivative concern*".

The whole Central Asian region is a focus of major concern for Russia and is a priority in its foreign policy (as re-stated in the new "Concept of Foreign Policy" approved by President Putin in February 2013). However, experts are well aware of the fact that the countries of the region are different, both in political stability and economic viability: from the somewhat stable authoritarian State of Uzbekistan to the extremely weak Tajikistan. The latter in particular seems to be the country of greater concern for Russian experts. The deployment of Russian border troops on the Tajik-Afghan border is considered in Moscow to be indispensable, since long stretches of this border are actually out of effective control. Such deployment was mentioned by several speakers at the NATO conference attended by the authors and also by individual experts, as a very concrete signal both of Russian concern and of Moscow's firm intention not to be passive in the face of possible security and stability threats originating from Afghanistan.

On the one hand, according to one expert, the search for an alliance with Russian traditional Islam has not yielded the expected results. On the other, Russian experts seem very much aware that, in Central Asia as in other Muslim countries, a secular option (one that was historically characterized by development and modernization, but also by repression

and oligarchy) seems very problematic to sustain, -although there seems to be a certain amount of disagreement among Russian experts on this point. Whilst some believe that such a thing as “*moderate political Islam*” does not exist and that any secularist regime - even if authoritarian - is better than any Islamist equivalent, most accept that the “least bad” realistic option will be that of moderate Islam. At the same time, however, there is a very serious concern about the growing strength and the externally-sustained organizational and financial capabilities of the conservative *Salafi* brand of Islam.

4. A Security Threat for Russia?

In terms of the possibility of radical influences extending beyond Central Asia and into Russian territory, there is no doubt that Islamist radicalism has become a major concern for Russian authorities. Moscow links the issue to the question of immigration from Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus, a phenomenon that has assumed major proportions and is now at the centre of government control policies (for example, all immigrant workers are automatically fingerprinted). It is also a highly politicized issue, which has encompassed episodes of often violent intolerance as well as demands from far-right groups to repress and expel non-Russian illegal immigrants.

Although no hard facts are so far available, it seems evident that such a concern exists. Most observers do not believe that Afghanistan could once again become the main hub for international terrorism after the US-NATO withdrawal, even if the Taliban return to power in a limited way, but many are aware that the danger of contagion is very real indeed. The “*jihadi* network” is interlinked, so that in consequence, areas with weaker government control and stronger militant groups can become staging areas for violent cross-border activities. Whilst Russian experts are extremely cautious in addressing this issue, they also appear to be aware of the potential risks deriving from the trans-national links of Islamist radicals.

5. Afghanistan: Government After 2014

Russian experts doubt that President Karzai will be able to remain in power after the 2014 elections, due to the various challenges his government is facing - mainly in the fields of governance (seriously impaired by corruption and cronyism) and security (limited military capacity, despite some improvements).

None the less, Russian assessments and forecasts on this point turned out to diverge markedly in the discussions with NATO officials who stressed that, while problems cannot certainly be denied, the Afghan government has shown steady improvements both in political and in military terms, so that it would be unjustified to dismiss its capacity to hold its ground even after the withdrawal of foreign troops. In contrast, Russian participants in the conference were much more negative.

In terms of the post-2014 period, the general expectation is that some sort of Taliban participation in government will be inevitable, but opin-

ions differed among Russian experts on whether or not the Taliban are “different” today from those of the 1990s. Regarding the latter, analysts pointed out the evident battle fatigue, the divisions within a movement that is more a galaxy than a unified entity, the presence of a new generation of fighters that are less “political” and thus more difficult to bring to unified positions. The predominant forecast is, however, that the Taliban currently know they cannot aspire to holding 100% of the power in Kabul; and that they might therefore be willing to accept the degree of compromise that is necessary to make a coalition possible. The stumbling block of the link with Al Qaida has – in the view of Russian experts - by and large disappeared, but another fundamental one, the acceptance of the Constitution, still remains to be overcome (so far only one component of the “Taliban galaxy”, Hekmatyar, has shown acceptance of this precondition).

It was suggested by one expert that a major civil war can end either as it did in Sri Lanka, with the total defeat of one of the two sides; or as in Nepal, where in spite of the tensions and contradictions, peace seems to hold. In the case of Afghanistan’s future, a “Nepali” peace was considered more likely.

Strong scepticism was also expressed by some analysts on the possibility that the Taliban will reach a political agreement with the present government in Kabul. At the same time, the Russians have not forgotten what happened to Najibullah after the Soviet withdrawal: one expert even stated that Karzai’s likely capacity to resist after 2014 does not seem to compare favourably with Najibullah’s - albeit limited - resilience after 1989.

Other equally sceptical, indeed, more pessimistic views on the possibility of a coalition government were expressed, with some experts stressing that it seems difficult to rule out that the Taliban (very difficult alliance partners under any circumstances), might gradually try to impose their hegemony within the coalition, thus emptying it of its political significance as a framework for compromise. One expert mentioned the fact that, until now, no one has addressed the question of whether and how the disarmament of the Taliban would be implemented, as a part of a compromise leading to a coalition government. The overall sense was that the Taliban will most likely evolve in the same direction as Hezbollah in Lebanon, that is, as a political party maintaining a military capability.

Both a Taliban attempt to undermine and erode the power of coalition partners on the one hand and the ambiguity between the military and the political dimensions on the other, would make the situation highly unstable, perhaps up to the point of threatening the rekindling of a civil war with the Taliban on one side (with Pakistani support) and the Northern Alliance on the other (in the past supported by Russia, India and Iran). It was noted in passing that in fact the Taliban-Northern Alliance conflict, whilst not in the open, and not featuring massive confrontations has actually never stopped, and has recently resulted in the killing of several Northern Alliance leaders.

It is worth noting that, though unable to rule out this potential negative scenario, Russian interlocutors were reluctant to explicitly address its implications, possibly due to state-held views on its future role in Afghanistan.

6. Russia's Role in Afghanistan After 2014

Whilst most experts agreed that after 2014 Russia will play a more important role in Afghanistan than since the Soviet withdrawal, all discarded the possibility of any military intervention.

Furthermore, criticism of US policy toward Afghanistan was near-unanimous. Moscow expected the US to both, totally defeat the Taliban and fully withdraw its military presence once the mission was accomplished. But the reality on the ground is proving otherwise: the Taliban have not been defeated and Washington has announced its intention to maintain a level of military presence on Afghan soil after 2014, though what level is still uncertain. Moscow, it was clear from discussions, is not happy.

Lack of recognition of Russian and Central Asian cooperation by the US was another area of apparent contention. Moscow appears to believe that efforts such as putting routes and facilities at the disposal of the US for the withdrawal of its troops (such as the airport in the Russian city of Ulyanovsk), and especially material from Afghanistan, deserve to be explicitly recognised.

Interestingly, the idea expressed by a number of other analysts in other fora that the 2014 withdrawal might induce the US to try to compensate with an increased military presence in at least some Central Asian countries, did not arise in discussions. Russian experts unanimously insisted that after 2014 the scope of international assistance to Afghanistan should once again become wider in scope. Russia will be ready to participate in this new phase, which is viewed by Moscow as "radically new", with elements of unpredictability that are both positive and negative. There is a very keen awareness of both, the very high dependence of the Afghan economy on external assistance (foreign aid currently represents nearly half of the country's GDP, leaving aside a great proportion of "off budget" transfers); and the fact that the current level of financial support by the international community is far from guaranteed should the Taliban join a future government in Kabul. This would therefore require a joint effort within the framework of a wider, ever-more-inclusive scope and circle of countries (Turkey and Indonesia were mentioned as possible contributors), in order to prevent the collapse of the country after 2014. One expert however, stressed Moscow's limited capacity to provide substantial financial assistance in the light of the current slowdown in its GNP growth rate.

Experts insisted on Russia's willingness to play an important role in Afghanistan and, even though it might seem counter-intuitive given the history of Soviet-Afghan relations, some stressed that far from being anti-Russian, Afghans in fact have a positive perception of Russia – with one expert going so far as stating that "*Afghanistan wants Russia*". This last view was however far from being universally shared: other experts pointed out that the experience of the anti-Soviet *mujahedin* still comprises an element of Afghan national identity as well as being part of official propaganda, thereby hinting that the thesis of Afghans being ready to welcome an increased Russian presence is not a given.

7. The Role of the Regional Powers

While noting that Russia will play a significant role in the post-2014 phase, Russian experts seem to be clearly aware that the task of sustaining a viable, stable Afghanistan that will not constitute a source of destabilization in the region, will require the efforts of not only Russia and the West (US, NATO, EU), but also of other regional powers: mainly Pakistan, Iran and India. In that respect, Russian experts fully converged with the STAP-RP project perspectives.

Russian experts stressed the importance of regional multilateral organizations as an interesting tool to assist in the stabilization of Afghanistan. The role of SCO and CSTO was specifically mentioned, the former in the area of economic assistance, and the latter on security. Russia is clearly pushing for an increased role for regional organizations, though some experts pointed out that some Central Asian countries – specifically Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – rather than supporting Russia's policies, privilege the pursuit of a more independent policy, toward the US and China.

7.1 Pakistan: A Higher Degree of Attention; Recognition of its Central Role

Russian interlocutors coincided on the recognition that Pakistan is the main player in Afghanistan, even to the extent of stating that *"there is no solution without Pakistan"*, in particular because of the country's strong links with the Taliban, which interlocutors none the less insisted should be nuanced: *"Pakistan does not own the Taliban"*, one expert put it, but rather, *"there is a convergence of interests"*.

As a consequence of the recognition of this essential role, Russia is interested in a strong Pakistan, and is convinced that not recognizing the importance of the country or, even worse, *"pushing Pakistan into a corner"*, would be huge mistakes.

No one questioned the importance for Russia of maintaining the historical links of close cooperation with India, and yet, according to interlocutors, in the interests of regional stability, what should take place is a certain *"rebalancing"* through increased Russian relations with Pakistan in particular in the economic arena. (In this regard, it was noted that economic relations between Russia and Pakistan were not interrupted even during the Afghan war, when the two countries were on opposing sides).

Although no direct link was explicitly made, it seems evident from discussions that the possibility of, and the interest for Russia, in closer relations with Pakistan are also connected with the recent deterioration of relations between Islamabad and Washington. US-Pakistani problems, however, do not appear to be over-estimated in Moscow. Russian experts are convinced that there are some *"theatricals"* in Islamabad's opposition to US drones, since the Pakistanis are aware of the fact that their use cannot be completely ruled out, but should rather be made more rational, efficient, and - especially - more discreet.

On the internal Pakistani political situation, experts assessed the election of Nawaz Sharif in May 2013 as a positive outcome. The latter is perceived to be in a much stronger position than his predecessor to negotiate a future for Afghanistan, both because of his expressed intention of lowering the confrontation with radical Islamists (including the TTP); and because of his intention to try to build better relations with India. The pursuit of a *détente* between Pakistan and India is in fact also considered in Moscow to be a very basic element for the stabilization of Afghanistan, where internal divisions and hostilities have been both dramatized and instrumentally exploited in the framework of the India-Pakistan rivalry and mutual suspicions.

Still on the positive side, Russian experts believe that the Pakistani army seems to have entered a new phase of greater self-restraint vis-à-vis political authority, having come to the realistic conclusion (in the views of analysts) that it alone cannot handle a country as large, and with such a diverse population, as Pakistan. Whilst the strength of radical Islam in the country is not under-estimated by Russian observers, it is considered that much will depend on the possibility of maintaining a sufficient level of economic growth indispensable for the maintenance of social stability (measured in terms of GNP yearly increase of not less than 7 %), as a pre-requisite for weakening the hold of radical Islamism.

A positive, measured opinion was also expressed on the question of Pakistani nuclear weapons and the global concern that they may fall into the hands of Islamist terrorists as a result of internal turmoil: Russian experts expressed the conviction that nuclear weapons are firmly under the control of the Pakistani army and, even in the remote case that some warheads would fall in the hands of radicals, they would not constitute a menace, since terrorists lack of the required delivery systems.

7.2 Iran: A Coincidence of Interests

With regards to Iran's role, the main focus of Russian analysts was on the necessity to fully involve Tehran in a solution for Afghanistan, in particular given Iran's economic, political and cultural presence in the country. One expert view expressed was that *"From Iran there is no threat to Russia, from Iran there is no extremism coming in our direction. Other countries are much more dangerous. Russia's and Iran's geopolitical interests coincide"*.

Russian experts stressed that as far as Afghanistan is concerned, this coincidence of interests derives from the fact that Iran, aware that a religion-based regime in Kabul could only be Sunni (and most likely radical Sunni, at that), appears to be in favour of political formulas which, while having necessarily a religious inspiration, would be constitutionally secular.

This is considered important also by Russia, concerned that a radical Sunni dominance in Kabul would be both destabilizing for Afghanistan (with the danger of a re-kindling of the civil war) and potentially dangerous in terms of influence, if not direct contagion across the borders of Afghanistan into Central Asia and beyond. Iran, Russian experts agree, is not playing the (*Shi'a*) religious card in Afghanistan, but tries instead to exert influence not

only through its political and economic presence, but also on the basis of language and cultural elements pertaining to “soft power”.

Iranian experts in Moscow point out that there is also an economic component in the importance of bilateral relations with Iran. Although trade with Iran constitutes only 1% of Russia’s foreign trade, it has none the less grown five-fold since 2000, and is characterized by a positive balance for Russia. Moreover Iran was in the third place among buyers of Russian armaments before the international sanctions started functioning, whilst 80% of Iranian arms imports came from Russia.

Russian relations with Iran have certainly been hampered by international sanctions, not only in the area of armament sales but particularly in oil and gas. Although Russia has always been “on the soft side”, since Russian companies have stronger interests in the US and in the EU, none the less, Russia cannot afford to risk economic reprisals for not abiding by the sanctions. In any case, overall relations with Iran are still strong, with 117 delegations exchanged in different areas in the course of 2012.

Russian interlocutors were unanimous in expressing the belief that Iran should play a positive regional role, both as far as Afghanistan is concerned and in a wider framework. Continued lack of recognition of Iran’s role, and increasing isolation, would have the double negative effect of making the solution of regional problems (starting from Afghanistan) more problematic and pushing the Iranian regime toward further radicalization if not open militarization, with an increase of the role of the IRGC.

7.3. China: The Dragon in the Room?

Scant reference was made to China in the course of discussions. What seems to be evident is the intent of Russian experts (including official Russian positions) to refute and dispel any possible hint at Russian-Chinese rivalry in Central Asia and Afghanistan. One expert pointed out that, though some speak of competition between the two countries over spheres of influence in the region, “*the only thing that can be said, is that there is a certain amount of normal economic competition, but definitely no geopolitical rivalry*”.

Overall Conclusions²

1. A deeper involvement in Afghanistan is considered by Russia not only necessary, but inevitable given the security concerns that a continued, and even increased instability in Afghanistan, combined with the prevalence of radical Islamist forces, would entail.
2. Russia does not seem to have a “Plan B” in case its red lines in terms of security threats from Afghanistan were to be crossed. The exclusion of the possibility of direct military intervention seems to be authentic. For this reason Russians, though well aware of the difficulties involved, insist that there is no alternative to the search for a coalition government with significant, but not hegemonic, Taliban participation.

2. These Conclusions are the authors’ own, drawn from the analysis presented by interlocutors and the surrounding discussions held.

3. The frequent calls to revert to the original mandate of the international community (a positive mandate focused on political, economic, social and cultural elements of stability and peaceful development) point at the direction in which Russia conceives its role in the future of Afghanistan.
4. A very strong insistence on the collective nature of the endeavour, which, to succeed, will have to include the widest possible number of countries, is also revealing of an awareness of the limits, both economic and political, that a Russian role would encounter. Russia claims an important role, but is well aware that it will not be able to play a leading one.
5. Russia's approach is thus thoroughly regional, with a growing focus on regional multilateralism.
6. Of extreme significance is the strong emphasis placed on the essential, central role of Pakistan for the solution of the Afghan question, and the increased attention toward the former combined with a marked optimism about its internal political situation after the election of Nawaz Sharif as the country's new Prime Minister.

Experts Consulted

Dr. Vyacheslav Y. Belokrenitsky, Deputy Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow. Head of the Centre for the Study of Near and Middle Eastern Countries.

Pilar Bonet, Foreign Correspondent for *El País*, Moscow
pbonet@elpais.es

Alexey Dedov, Deputy Director, 2d Dept of Asia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Moscow

Dr. Irina Kobrinskaya, Executive Director, Foundation for Prospective Studies and Initiatives, and Senior Research Fellow, IMEMO, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow
psifoundation@imemo.ru

Amb. Mikhail A. Konarovskiy, Former Ambassador of Russia to Afghanistan, MFA of Russia, Moscow
maonarovskiy@gmail.com

Amb. Nikolai I. Kozyrev, Senior Fellow, Institute of Contemporary International Studies, Diplomatic Academy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia

Dr. Alexander I. Nikitin, Director, Center for Trans-Atlantic Security, MGIMO, Moscow

Dr. Victor Korgun, Leading Expert on Afghanistan, Head of the Afghan Sector at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences
vkorgun@mail.ru

Dr. Alexander Lukin, Vice-President, Russian Diplomatic Academy, MFA. Distinguished expert on China and Russian-Chinese relations.
lukinru@yahoo.com

Dr. Nina M. Mamedova, Leading Researcher, distinguished specialist of Iran. Head of the Dept. of Iranian Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences
mamedovan@mail.ru

Dr. Aziz Niyazi, Senior Researcher, Central Eurasia Research Center, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences
cerc@ivran.ru

Joëlle Rizk, Managing Consultant at Revolve Magazine, Brussels
jmrizk@outlook.com

Dr. Ivan Safranchuk, Deputy Director, Institute of Contemporary International Studies, Russian Diplomatic Academy, MFA
latuk.info@gmail.com

Dmitri Trenin, Director, Carnegie Moscow Center
dtrenin@carnegie.ru

Konstantin von Eggert, Political commentator and host for Kommersant FM radio, Moscow
k-von-eggert@yandex.ru

Dr. Natalia Zamaraeva, distinguished specialist of Pakistan, Head of the Dept of Iranian Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences
olunja@mail.ru

For more information on the project visit our website:
www.cidobafpakproject.com