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**RUSSIA'S AFGHAN PROBLEM**  
**The Russian Federation**  
**and the Afghanistan problem since 2001**

M a r e k M e n k i s z a k

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# **RUSSIA'S AFGHAN PROBLEM**

## **The Russian Federation and the Afghanistan problem since 2001**

### **Introduction**

In recent years, there have been signs that Russia is reactivating its policy towards Afghanistan in the political, economic and security spheres. Along with the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and the difficult political and security situation in Pakistan, there has been a rise in the importance of the so-called 'northern supply route' for the forces participating in ISAF operations in Afghanistan (the NDN or Northern Distribution Network), part of which runs through Russian territory<sup>1</sup>. So for this reason as well, the problem of Afghanistan has become a key issue in the dialogue between Russia and the US, NATO and individual Western countries. Its role in Russia's relations with the countries of Central Asia, China, Pakistan, Iran and India is also growing.

This text is an attempt to analyse Russia's policy towards Afghanistan and the Afghan problem over the past ten years in its various dimensions, and also contains elements of a forecast regarding how this policy will further evolve. This work's aim is to answer questions such as:

- What determines Russian policy on the Afghanistan question?
- How has Russia's policy evolved, and what have its effects been?
- What are Russia's interests?

At present, the situation in Afghanistan and the attitude of those taking part in the military operations in the country have passed a new milestone. The Afghan government is seeking a political agreement with its former chief opponent, the Taliban. The USA and the states of the Western coalition are seeking to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan, and to withdraw the bulk of their forces

<sup>1</sup> For more see A. Kuchins, T. Sanderson, D. Gordon, 'The Northern Distribution Network and the Modern Silk Road. Planning for Afghanistan's future', CSIS, December 2009, Washington.

from that country within the next few years. So, the aims of this text include the following:

- to present the dilemma facing Russia in the light of these facts, and which concerns its choice of strategy concerning the Afghan problem;
- to outline the main scenarios; and
- to formulate an overall forecast of Russia's future policy.

The text consists of five parts. The first outlines the considerations of Russia's Afghan policy, and its place within Russian foreign policy as a whole. The second presents the Russian Federation's policy towards Afghanistan, in both chronological order and by issues. The third part presents how Russian policy towards the US and NATO forces' operation in Afghanistan has evolved, in particular what form Russian support for the operation has taken. In the fourth part, Russia's policy towards the Afghan problem is characterised in a regional context. Finally, the fifth part contains conclusions and a forecast on Russian policy towards the Afghan problem.

## Theses

1. Russia's policy towards the problem of Afghanistan has become one of the key issues in Russian foreign policy, both regarding the countries of the region and the key actors outside the region. This has been influenced by the evolution of the internal situation in Afghanistan itself, among other factors. However, it has also been shaped under the influence of Russia's changing relationship with the United States and leading Western countries, the countries of Central Asia, China and the countries of South Asia.

2. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, Russia's policy towards Afghanistan went through various stages: from the offensive in 2001-2002, when Russia attempted to build up a strong presence and influence in Afghanistan; through a period of stagnation in 2003-2006, when Russia realised that it could not compete effectively with predominantly Western influences in the country; through to the period since 2007, which has marked a return of Russia's active policy towards Afghanistan, as Moscow began taking advantage of the deteriorating security situation to improve its relations with the government in Kabul, and to increase its own importance to the Western coalition forces.

3. Both Russia's specific interests & aims, and its own policy towards Afghanistan, have been subject to a certain evolution over the last ten years. However, at a basic level, several of those interests have remained unchanged. Russia wanted to be as influential as possible in Afghanistan, while at the same time limiting the influence of those countries whose policies it perceived as threatening to its interests, particularly the US and Pakistan. On the one hand, Russia did not want the Taliban to achieve full political and military success, seeing that possibility as a certain challenge to their interests and influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Russia also supported the international military presence based on the UN Security Council mandate (albeit not always enthusiastically), thus demonstrating that only Moscow's participation in decisions could bring about positive effects.

On the other hand, it would not have suited Moscow to see the complete stabilisation of Afghanistan if the Western military coalition had succeeded in its aims. That would in fact have made Afghanistan an important foothold for US influence, and opened up new opportunities for Central Asian states to increase their independence from Russia, including by participating in ambitious infrastructure projects.

4. By tracking the evolution of Russian policy, we can see in fact that two strategies were being implemented (to simplify matters). During the first few years, Russia was betting that the situation in Afghanistan would be stabilised fairly rapidly, which would lead both to the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan, and more importantly, from Central Asia; this would have opened up the possibility of Russia's economic expansion and the overall growth of its influence in Afghanistan.

However, together with the deteriorating security situation and the expansion of the Western presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia, Russia became more interested in maintaining the Western presence inside Afghanistan itself. On the one hand, that situation engaged the US and NATO's forces, resources and political attention in that country, thus weakening them by default; on the other, it gave Russia an additional tool, by means of transit services and transportation, to obtain political and economic benefits from them. At the same time, however, Russia sought to limit the Western presence in Central Asia, or at least make it subject to greater Russian supervision. Russia itself increasingly sought to exploit the problem of Afghanistan, in order to increase its presence in Central Asia and strengthen its cooperation with the countries in the region. Meanwhile, the plan to increase Russia's presence in Afghanistan, especially in the economic sphere, has been pushed into the background (although it has not yet been discarded). The problem of Afghanistan is increasingly becoming an instrument of Russia's policy towards the West and the region surrounding Afghanistan.

5. The period from 2009 to 2011 marks a new, breakthrough period in the development of the Afghan problem. Hamid Karzai's government is working to achieve a political agreement with the Taliban. and the Western coalition intends to withdraw the bulk of its forces from Afghanistan within a few



years. These moves have faced Russia with the dilemma of choosing a political strategy. In this situation, Russia has been increasing its political support for the Karzai government; it formally supports the 'process of national reconciliation' in Afghanistan, and has established contacts with the Taliban. At the same time, though, it has taken an ambiguous stance on the withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan: on the one hand Moscow supports the withdrawal, and is concerned over the possibility that any part of the US forces might remain in the country long-term; but on the other hand, it is concerned that Western forces might withdraw too hastily, and is uneasy about the local security challenges which could arise after their departure. Above all, however, Russia fears that at least some US forces may be relocated from Afghanistan to other countries in Central Asia, which could in the long run lead to the further erosion of Russian influence in the region.

6. In the longer term, Russia can simply either try to reproduce the anti-Taliban alliance and the international coalition supporting it, creating a buffer zone in northern Afghanistan; or it can support the Afghan government's efforts to achieve a political agreement, which may actually lead to the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan – and Russia would then have to find a *modus vivendi* with them.

7. It seems that there is disagreement among the Russian elite on which strategy to choose; Russia seems to want to implement elements of different approaches, and in this way try to keep some room for manoeuvre for as long as possible. Therefore, Russian policy towards the Afghan problem is likely to be reactive in nature, and will depend both on internal developments in Afghanistan and the attitudes of important international actors.

Therefore, in the near future we can expect Russia to take the following actions:

■ simultaneously support Hamid Karzai's government, develop contacts with representatives of the former Northern Alliance, establish contacts with the Pashtun elites, and hold dialogue with part of the Taliban;

- maintain and even increase support in the security sphere for both the Afghan government and the international forces (in particular, for their return transit), in expectation of political and financial benefits in return;
- discourage the US and the Western allies from increasing their military presence in Central Asia: one hand, by working with them; on the other, by putting political pressure on the US and the Central Asian states; and also by exploiting the active rise of Islamic radicalism in Central Asia, and promoting a 'controlled destabilisation' of the region;
- create instruments for increasing its security presence in Central Asia.

# I. Afghanistan's place in Russian policy

## 1. Considerations in Russia's policy towards Afghanistan

To better understand Russia's policy towards Afghanistan, we must first ask ourselves why Afghanistan is important for Russia. Geographical, historical and socio-political contexts are all involved, as are Russia's relations with specific international actors.

### 1.1. Geographical considerations

From the perspective of Russia, Afghanistan occupies an important geo-political, geo-strategic, and geo-economic location. It is a country which connects important regions: post-Soviet Central Asia and the Middle East with South and East Asia. In particular, the situation in Afghanistan has a directly effect on the post-Soviet Central Asian countries, especially the southern area; in Russia's eyes, these states belong within its natural sphere of influence. Thus, Afghanistan can play the role of either a buffer zone, protecting the vulnerable southern border of Russia; or of a source of danger to this same borderland. The situation in and around Afghanistan significantly affects the potential course of communication lines and the transit of energy, especially between Central and South Asia. On this same basis, it can also be stated that **from Russia's standpoint, Afghanistan is a country with a strategic location**<sup>2</sup>.

### 1.2. Historical considerations

The Russian state's activity in Afghanistan dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century, as part of the Russian Empire's expansion in Central Asia and its regional rivalry with the British Empire. As a result of Russian-British

<sup>2</sup> This idea was clearly expressed by the Russian president's special representative for Afghanistan, Ambassador Zamir Kabulov, in an interview for the website Afghanistan.ru. He stated among other things that the possible siting of (US) military bases in Afghanistan could lead to the projection of power into resource-rich neighbouring regions. 'Nuzhno idti v Afganistan s otkryтым serdцем', interview with Zamir Kabulov, www.afghanistan.ru, 25.05.2011.

agreements on delimiting their zones of influence<sup>3</sup>, Afghanistan fell on the British side, separated from the Russian zone in Central Asia by the Panj river. This informal separation proved to be quite stable, and was maintained in relations between Soviet Russia and Afghanistan. Communist Russia recognised the independence of Afghanistan as early as 1919, and developed generally friendly relations with it, although it did slowly make efforts to infiltrate the Afghan elite. This approach bore fruit in 1978, when a military coup carried out by pro-Communist and pro-Soviet officers made Afghanistan a formal ally of the Soviet Union and part of the global socialist camp, although this led to armed resistance from some of the Afghan people. In 1979, a Soviet military intervention, linked to a *coup d'état*, tightened the Soviet Union's control over Afghanistan, but also drew Moscow into a bloody war with the Islamic armed opposition, contributing to the culmination of rising tensions in relations between the USSR and the West. The Soviet military intervention involved about 120,000 soldiers at its peak, but it did not stifle the armed resistance, which was supported by the US and Pakistan, and led to the deaths of about 15,400 Soviet soldiers (according to official data). On the other hand, the period of Soviet domination in Afghanistan left its mark on this country, in the form of significant Russian economic involvement, as well as a significant Russian influence among the Afghan ruling elite. Political changes in the Soviet Union and *détente* in East-West relations led to the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, and the reduction of military aid to the pro-Soviet Afghan government contributed to its overthrow in 1992 by the armed Islamic opposition, ushering in a period of prolonged civil war in Afghanistan. The concomitant loss of Russian influence in Afghanistan became one of the signs and symbols of the collapse of Russia's global power status. Russia returned to activity in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, and was fuelled by on one hand with rising threats to the international community from the extreme Islamic fundamentalist Taliban government (which ruled Afghanistan from 1996), and on the other with a policy of reconstructing Russia's 'imperial' position. It can likewise be stated that **the Afghanistan question was temporarily one of the central issues of Russian and Soviet foreign policy, and a symbol of Russia's status as a superpower – or of the crisis in that status.**

<sup>3</sup> The first agreement on this issue was concluded in 1878, the next in 1895, and the next in 1907.

### 1.3. Socio-political considerations

Afghanistan's importance for Russia depends on the **close socio-cultural ties between Afghanistan, especially its northern part, and post-Soviet Central Asia**. This is because northern Afghanistan is dominated by ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen, who are adjacent to their compatriots in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. This has had a major impact on the development of the internal situation both in Afghanistan (being one of the factors motivating the support given by Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the Northern Alliance (dominated by Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazara) against the Taliban) and in the countries of Central Asia, especially Tajikistan. In particular, the armed Islamic Tajik opposition used support bases in northern Afghanistan during the civil war in Tajikistan in the years 1992-1997; whereas in 1997-2001, the Kulab region of Tajikistan was the main base for the Afghan Northern Alliance.

**The Afghanistan question, then, also became an internal problem for the Soviet Union and Russia.** The large number of victims of the Afghan conflict, which directly involved around 620,000 young Soviet people, caused a deep trauma in society and the Soviet elite. It created a kind of 'Afghan syndrome' – a reluctance to engage the military on a large scale outside of Russia. Moreover, Afghan war veterans, including disabled people, have become one of post-communist Russia's social problems. The state has not been able to cope with their re-assimilation to social life, and sometimes they have joined the ranks of organised crime groups.

## 2. The problem of Afghanistan as a factor in Russia's policy on the main actors

The problem of Afghanistan has been, and still is, an important element in Russia's relations with specific international actors, including the countries of Central Asia, China, the USA, NATO and the wider Western countries, as well as the countries of South Asia.

## 2.1. The problem of Afghanistan and Central Asia & China

Russia has perceived, and still perceives, post-Soviet Central Asia as its natural sphere of influence, and as a buffer zone to protect Russia's 'soft southern underbelly'. Moscow has therefore undertaken both bilateral and multilateral initiatives to defend and consolidate its dominance in this area. Some elements of this policy have been closely related to the situation in Afghanistan. In particular, the civil war in Afghanistan in the 1990s and the subsequent 'war on terror' have given Russia valid arguments for maintaining and expanding its military presence in Central Asia, including Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The threat of terrorism and drug trafficking from Afghanistan has also permitted Russia to push for closer multilateral cooperation in the sphere of security and defence, with the participation of most Central Asian states (except Turkmenistan) in the Collective Security Treaty (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), as well as in the specialised structures which these two organisations have created in this area.

On the other hand, it is precisely the situation in Afghanistan, especially the international 'anti-terrorist operation' started there by the US and UK, then followed by the rest of NATO, after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, which sparked the real geo-strategic 'earthquake' in Central Asia, marking the beginning of the serious commitment and military presence of Western countries (especially the USA) in the region. Indeed, the Russian monopoly presence in the field of security in Central Asia has been challenged, and the position of the region's countries has been strengthened. Moscow sensed a growing threat to its own interests, which has led to active attempts to try and counteract this situation.

At the end of the 1990s, the threat of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, as well as the illegal trafficking of drugs with their source in Afghanistan, had already given a strong push to improving Russian-Chinese cooperation (including in the security sphere), in both the bilateral and multilateral forums which they dominated, such as the 'Shanghai Five', which in 2000 was transformed into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. In the face of growing threats on its own territory, including to (and within) Chinese Turkestan (the autonomous Xinjiang-Uighur region), Beijing has been understanding about Russia strength-

ening its presence in the security sphere in Central Asia, seeing it as an important bulwark against these growing threats. In turn, Moscow's decision to consent to the Western (mainly American) military presence in Central Asia after 11 September 2001 (a situation which it was partially forced into) caused serious concern in Beijing, which saw this as a direct challenge to its own security interests. Since then China's direct involvement in Central Asia has gradually increased (although this is least apparent in the security field), and Beijing is also considering the increasing independence of the countries in the region. This has caused, and continues to cause, growing concern in Russia.

## 2.2. The problem of Afghanistan and the West

The problem of Afghanistan has always been, and continues to be, part of Russia's complex relations with the Western world, where the competition between them has been accompanied by partial cooperation. There have been both psychological and political conditions to this problem. Some of the new Russian political elite have inherited from the Soviet Union a syndrome of political failure in Afghanistan, in a war which was seen as a proxy war against the Western bloc led by the United States. This suspicious attitude towards the US was strengthened by the predominant conviction in the Russian elite that the Taliban's success in Afghanistan in the 1990s was a direct result of military, financial and political support from Pakistan, behind which stood the United States. Despite this, in the light of subsequent military successes for the Taliban from the beginning of 2000, dialogue and cooperation between Russia and the US on Afghanistan were strengthened. As early as mid-2001, the Russian government attempted to positively revise its relations with the United States; the situation in Afghanistan played a key role in this process. After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Moscow (after a brief hesitation) gave limited support to the US-led anti-terrorist military coalition and Operation Enduring Freedom; this gave a public dimension to the policy which was then referred to as 'a pro-Western turn in Russian foreign policy.' By making these gestures towards the US and its Western allies (albeit sometimes under pressure from events), Russia was counting on a breakthrough in the West's policy, and also that the West would recognise certain important Russian interests (including Russia's zone of influence within the CIS). However, the cooperation in Afghanistan and on some other issues did not break down Moscow's distrust of the USA. The

relationship began to cool more visibly as of autumn 2002, upon the US's preparation and subsequent implementation (spring 2003) of its armed intervention in Iraq, despite Moscow's strong opposition. Moscow's concern was particularly aroused by what it perceived as the growing involvement of the West (the USA, NATO, the EU and its member states) in the region of the CIS. Faced with Washington ignoring both its warnings and its offer of a political deal, Russia moved onto an anti-Western offensive, which culminated in the war with Georgia in August 2008. This aggressive Russian policy briefly cooled its relations with the West. However, with the advent of the new Democratic administration of Barack Obama in the US (from 2009) and the global economic crisis, Russia began to react positively to Western initiatives for a positive breakthrough in their mutual relations. Moscow responded with modest yet positive gestures, the most important of which was the agreement on US military transit to Afghanistan through its territory (Germany, France and Spain had previously received such permission, as 'rewards' for their 'pragmatic' policy towards Russia). Russia acted specifically to raise the importance of the so-called northern transit route to Afghanistan for the coalition forces operating in the country. The curve of Russian-Western relations has also indirectly affected Russia's own policy towards Afghanistan. Even during the greatest crisis in their relations, Russia did not break off its limited cooperation with the West in Afghanistan. Either way, Russia's policy towards the problem of Afghanistan has been, and still remains, one of its most important instruments in its relations with the West.

### **2.3. The problem of Afghanistan and South Asia**

The situation in Afghanistan has also been, and is increasingly becoming, an element of Russia's dialogue with the important regional actors in South Asia, particularly India, Pakistan and Iran. Together with Russia, India and Iran were key sponsors (in the form of military and financial assistance) of the Northern Alliance, the Tajik- and Uzbek-dominated Afghan opposition to the Taliban. Their common interest was to prevent Pakistan from becoming excessively powerful, as it was seen as the unofficial sponsor of the Taliban movement.

If some major energy projects are implemented, especially the long-discussed TAPI gas pipeline (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India), it is also now in



Russia's interest that this should lead to a diversion of energy exports from Central to South Asia at the expense of Europe (where they are competing with Russian exports) and China (where Russia wants to increase its presence).

However, the last few years have seen an intensification of dialogue between Russia and Pakistan, including on the Afghanistan issue. This can be interpreted as an element of Russia's policy to influence the internal situation in Afghanistan, especially the Karzai government and the Pashtun elite, as well as Russia preparing itself for the possible return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan.

## II. Russia and Afghanistan since 2001

Russia's policy towards the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has three dimensions: political relations; humanitarian and economic aid; and support in the security sphere. Russia's policy towards Afghanistan is being carried out by different actors, whose importance to and impact on this policy are constantly changing. To understand Russian policy, it is also important to know the genesis of the current situation, in particular Russia's attitude towards Afghanistan under the Taliban, and in the light of the Western military operation to overthrow the latter.

### 1. Genesis of the situation: Russia, the Taliban regime and its overthrow

Russia's policy towards the fundamentalist Taliban regime, which governed most of Afghanistan from 1996, was formally very clear and principled. In reality, however, there were certain inconsistencies.

In its public declarations, Russia condemned the Taliban regime and sought to mobilise the international community against it. To this end, Moscow initiated political dialogues with Iran, India and the USA (in the latter case, this was formalised in early 2000 with the establishment of a joint working group on Afghanistan). Moscow was a co-sponsor of successive UN Security Council resolutions in 1999 and 2000 condemning the Taliban and introducing further sanctions against them. In March and May of 2000, Russia threatened the Taliban with raids on its terrorist training bases (Moscow said it had information that Chechen separatists were being trained at those locations). A measurable form of Russian involvement was their providing not just political but also military assistance (in the form of supplies of weapons, ammunition and heavy military equipment) to the Northern Alliance (a coalition of groups and detachments of Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara fighters, led by Ahmad Shah Masoud, the hero of the previous struggle against the Soviet Army). In cooperation with Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan also gave the Alliance similar assistance (as did Iran and India). As the Russian side pointed out, it was this support which saved the

Northern Alliance in the autumn of 2000, as they defended the last scraps of Afghan territory they controlled before what then seemed to be their inevitable defeat by the Taliban. It was also Russian military aid in autumn 2001 (together with the air bombing of Taliban positions by the US and UK) which assisted the Northern Alliance's offensive leading to their liberation of Kabul in November that year, and the subsequent expulsion of the Taliban from almost the whole of Afghan territory. Moreover, it was Russia which, arguing with the US in October and November 2001, demanded that none of the (so-called moderate) representatives of the Taliban should be admitted into the interim Afghan government (a move which Washington had been leaning towards).

On the other hand, Russia officially advocated a peaceful solution to the Afghan problem (and therefore opposed any military action against the Taliban); yet they were playing their own kind of game with the Taliban. The Russians made their first publicly known contacts with the Taliban in 1995-1996, when Zamir Kabulov negotiated the release of Russian airmen imprisoned by the Taliban in Kandahar<sup>4</sup>. Later confidential contacts between the Russian Federation and Taliban representatives were reportedly aimed at persuading the Taliban to renounce their support for terrorism<sup>5</sup>. In particular, these Russian/Taliban talks were held between April and August 2000 in Turkmenistan (a state which maintained official contacts with the Taliban). Moreover, from the end of 1999 until probably September 2000, Russia suspended its military aid to the Northern Alliance, which allowed the Taliban to achieve major successes in their offensive against the Alliance in northern Afghanistan.

The most logical explanation for Moscow's attitude was its wish to raise serious concerns in the Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan (especially Uzbekistan), and prompt them to strengthen their cooperation with Russia in the security sphere.

<sup>4</sup> See the *communiqué* on the Russian Federation president's decree on the nomination of Zamir Kabulov, [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru) 22 March 2011: <http://kremlin.ru/news/10713>

<sup>5</sup> See the interview given by the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Viktor Trubnikov to the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 29 March 2001, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru). For Russia, the problems included the fact that the Taliban government had recognised the independence of Chechnya and established 'diplomatic relations' with it.

It is also possible that there was limited, tactical cooperation between Russia and the Taliban in giving some support to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU is an armed Islamic organisation which appeared in 1999, with the declared goal of overthrowing the Uzbek government of Islam Karimov and establishing a caliphate in the Fergana Valley. The IMU's foundation was laid by certain former commanders of the United Tajik Opposition; after the civil war in that country, some of them joined the Tajik government as part of the peace process, while others remained in their bases in northern Afghanistan<sup>6</sup>. On two occasions (in August 1999 and August-November 2000), the IMU conducted armed attacks on the territories of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan from their bases in Tajikistan (the so-called Batken crises). They were able to do so thanks to the Tajik army's passivity and despite the significant Russian forces stationed in that country. Both crises ended with Russian helicopters transporting the IMU militants from Tajikistan into Afghanistan, which could not have happened without the Taliban's agreement. A similar evacuation took place in August 2001, although on that occasion it had not been preceded by any armed clashes<sup>7</sup>.

Another possible explanation for Russia's attitude to the Taliban is that Moscow was convinced that they would defeat the Northern Alliance while the Western states and other actors stood passively by. In this situation, Moscow decided to prepare for a new *status quo*, especially since other countries, including several in Central Asia, had made contacts with the Taliban for fear that they would be diverted north of the Panj river (US representatives also made similar contacts with the Taliban). However, this does not explain the successive turnarounds in Moscow's policy.

Russia's final support for the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in autumn 2001 is easier to explain. Moscow had clearly undertaken an offensive to win influence in Afghanistan, knowing the United States' determination to destroy

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the IRU see e.g. Vitaly Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle*, Lanham 2005, chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> For more, see e.g. Ahmad Rashid, *Jihad. The Rise of Militant Islam In Central Asia*, New Haven, 2002. On the other hand, in mid-July 2001, a representative of the Taliban government accused Russia of creating a secret training base for international terrorists in the Afghan province of Badakhshan, which could disprove that allegation. This was officially denied in a communiqué from the Russian Federation's Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 19 July 2001 ([www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru)).

the Taliban militarily after 11 September. In this context, both the significant Russian military aid and the lobbying by Russian diplomacy in autumn 2001 for the Afghan government to extend its recognition of Burhanuddin Rabbani (the *de facto* representative of the Northern Alliance) were attempts to maximise that influence. This attempt was initially quite successful, given that the interim Afghan government led by Hamid Karzai, which was based on a compromise in Bonn on 5 December 2001, was dominated by Northern Alliance leaders (along with a group of Pashtun *emigrés*).

## **2. The evolution of Russia's policy on the Afghan government and elites**

When we analyse Russia's policy towards Afghanistan, we can see a certain evolution taking place. On this basis, it is possible to distinguish at least three stages of this policy:

### **2.1. The Russian offensive towards Afghanistan's interim government (2001-2002)**

The overthrow of the Taliban government, and then the formation of Afghanistan's provisional government at the end of December 2001, marked the beginning of Russia's political offensive in that country. These intensive political contacts were aimed at building the foundations of Russian influence on the political, economic and security spheres in Afghanistan.

Immediately after the liberation of Kabul (26 November 2001) a group of Russian diplomats came to the city to open a diplomatic mission, which was achieved on 28 December.

In its relations with the new Afghan government, Russia initially focused on Prime Minister Hamid Karzai and those influential members of government who had been part of the former Northern Alliance. Among other things, Russia's then foreign minister Igor Ivanov visited Kabul on 4 February 2002, when he invited Karzai to Moscow (who duly went there on 12 March and again on 4 June). On 12 February, the Afghan deputy defence minister Marshal Mohammed Fahim

(the Northern Alliance's former chief of staff and intelligence) visited Moscow, and principally discussed the supply of weapons and military equipment for the emerging Afghan army; and on 28 February, the new interior minister Yunus Kanuni (another Northern Alliance leader) also visited the Russian capital.

The Russian offensive in Afghanistan was clearly intended to achieve maximum impact on the Afghan government, as well as to conclude various economic and military agreements which would form a basis for Russia's real influence in Afghanistan.

## **2.2. The period of stagnation (2003-2006)**

In 2003, Russian activity in Afghanistan clearly slowed down. Moscow finally realised that its place in a country dependent on the support of the US and its allies would mostly be defined by the good will of Washington. Russia thus tried to make the most of the assets it had, especially the fact that the Afghan army and security forces were still using equipment inherited from the Soviet period. So, with the consent of the United States (or with its indirect assistance), the Afghan forces continued to receive spare parts and equipment from Russia for their military use. However, on one hand, conflicts within the Afghan government led to the departure in autumn 2004 of some of the former Northern Alliance leaders, at the expense of strengthening Hamid Karzai's position (he won the October presidential election that year); and on the other, there was a distinct cooling of relations between Russia and the West at the same time (mainly against the background of events in Ukraine), which in turn translated into a visible cooling of relations between Moscow and Kabul. The chill in relations between Russia and the West resulted in a more critical attitude towards the Western military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and a pause in military assistance to Afghanistan in 2005.

## **2.3. Russia's return to Afghanistan (2007-?)**

However after 2006, the steadily deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan (due to the ever-increasing intensity of the Taliban's military action in Afghanistan and on the Pakistani/Afghan border) and the growing tensions between President Karzai and the Western participants in the coalition forces

(especially the US) prompted Karzai to seek political support abroad, beyond his traditional allies; and this included Russia.

Russia responded to this by diversifying its political activity in Afghanistan. Firstly, it maintained its contacts with its traditional (especially Tajik) allies from the former Northern Alliance, and most likely supported the creation in 2007 of a new Afghan opposition bloc, the National Front (a move mainly driven by Iran), which was dominated by Russia's traditional partners in northern Afghanistan. However, this project soon fell apart because of internal conflicts, and some of the participants came to an understanding with the Karzai government.

Secondly, Russia openly increased its public support for President Hamid Karzai by calling for an increase in real independence (*de facto* from the West) for the Afghan government, and loudly criticised the ISAF's poor results in the fight against the Taliban and the illegal production and trafficking of drugs. In addition, Moscow initiated a dialogue with Pashtun politicians and declared its support for Karzai's policy of national reconciliation, including possible talks and peace terms with the 'moderate' or 'rank and file Taliban'. Russia formulated four conditions for this: the renunciation by the 'moderate Taliban' of the armed struggle; breaking their ties with al-Qaeda; the recognition of the constitution and other laws of Afghanistan; and not holding any talks with the extremist Taliban leaders, as defined by UN sanctions<sup>8</sup>.

Russia's support for President Karzai rose in direct proportion to the rising tension between him and the United States, the other key Western states, and the coalition forces in Afghanistan. This became especially clear during and after the presidential elections in Afghanistan in August 2009. Unlike the West, which put political pressure on Karzai to share power with the opposition, Russia gave him its *de facto* unconditional support, despite numerous allegations that the Afghan authorities rigged the ballot. Russia also began to openly communicate with representatives of the 'moderate Taliban' (one of whom visited Moscow in

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. the Russian ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin's speech to the UNSC of 23 March 2010, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

spring 2009)<sup>9</sup>. Much indicates that direct contacts between representatives of ‘official’ Moscow and the Taliban took place in 2011<sup>10</sup>.

### 3. The main political actors

#### 3.1. The centres of Russia’s Afghan policy

It is a little difficult to analyse Russia’s interests and policy towards Afghanistan, because they have been influenced and affected by several centres and circles, and both the debate and the decision-making process are still to a great extent unclear. The situation was complicated when the system of direct presidential power was succeeded in 2008 by the system of government under the ‘ruling tandem’ of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitri Medvedev. While formal leadership in foreign policy remains with the president, it seems that in practice this policy is still under the decisive influence of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (among other techniques, he makes use of the government apparatus and the presidium of the government, as well as his personal ties inside the Presidential Administration, and his own influence on the president). However, President Medvedev’s role in shaping foreign policy tactics seemed to be increasing, with his use of the apparatus of the Presidential Administration and of outside experts.

Irrespective of this, we can name some other centres of influence on Russia’s policy towards Afghanistan, based on policy observations and the opinion of Russian experts:

<sup>9</sup> Mohamad Washim Watanwal of Nangarhar province was a participant in the Russo-Afghan conference in Moscow in May 2009. There were also reports in early 2009 that Russia had taken control of one or more groups of Taliban operating in North and South Waziristan on the Pakistani border. A. Serenko, ‘Na ‘linii Dyuranda’ poyavilis’ ‘Russkie Taliby’, [www.afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/14815.html), 29 May 2009: <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/14815.html>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. M.K. Bhadrakumar, ‘Mullah Omar gets a Russian visitor’, *Asia Times online*, 24 March 2011: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/MC24Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/MC24Df01.html). The Russian President’s special representative Zamir Kabulov admittedly denied the information about contacts with the Taliban, but at the same declared that Russia would be ready for this. Xinhua, 29 March 2011.



– **The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation**, under Sergei Lavrov, has so far formally played a co-ordinating role; this was reflected by the President's appointment in 2002 of an Interdepartmental Committee on Afghanistan, chaired by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. It included representatives from at least ten relevant ministries, agencies and departments. In practice, however, the MFA was and remains primarily an executor of policy, and one of the centres of influence. The MFA has a particularly important role in intensifying dialogue on Afghanistan within the region, covering India and Pakistan, China and Iran.

– **The Federal Drug Control Service**, and specifically its head Viktor Ivanov (who represents some of the secret services' officers) is formally only responsible for one section of Russia's relations with Afghanistan and the countries involved in resolving the Afghan problem: cooperation in combating drug trafficking from Afghanistan. However in practice, the FDCS's activity and its contribution to Afghanistan in recent years has grown steadily, and the FDCS has become the *de facto* parallel channel (and an alternative to the MFA) for Russia's international dialogue, including with the USA (Ivanov co-chairs the Russian-American subcommittee on anti-narcotics cooperation within the Lavrov/Clinton Presidential Commission) and with Afghanistan's neighbours. He played an active and very visible role in 2009 and especially 2010, with the beginning of the joint Russian-American drug operation.

– **The Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI)** under Yevgeni Primakov (who resigned as chairman in March 2011, and was replaced by Sergei Katyrin) and deputy head Boris Pastukhov, who also represent the wider business lobby (led by Abubakar Arsamakov, the head of the Russian-Afghan Business Council, and head of the Moscow Industrial Bank MIB); they mainly lobby for the creation of conditions to increase Russia's economic presence in Afghanistan. So far, the CCI's activity has had little effect. Nor has the departure from the chairmanship of the influential Yevgeni Primakov (a former prime minister and former head of civilian intelligence) helped to raise the CCI's profile.

– **The President of the Russian Federation's special representative on Afghanistan**, the former Russian ambassador in Kabul and former head of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asian Department of the MFA Zamir Kabulov. Since the establishment of this post (by decree of President Medvedev on 22 March 2011), he has been the most dynamic

centre of Russia's policy towards Afghanistan and the Afghan problem. It seems that Kabulov has had some success in trying to take over the role of not only the formal policy coordinator for the Russian Federation on Afghan matters (the presidential decree is one of the instruments of office which can improve coordination between departments<sup>11</sup>, but also the real coordinator of the policy line as well.

Other centres also influence Russia's policy towards Afghanistan. The most important ones seem to include the **secret services**, particularly the **Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff** (GRU, military intelligence). This is because there are a substantial number of Russian specialists on Afghanistan speaking the local languages, who are former Soviet Army officers who participated in the 1980s intervention in Afghanistan. The secret services are the Russian government's main source of information and analysis on Afghanistan and the situation in its immediate surroundings, as well as an important channel of dialogue for actors both inside and outside Afghanistan.

A role in policy towards Afghanistan has also traditionally been played by the **Ministry for Emergency Situations** (MChS), but this is mainly limited to supplying humanitarian aid.

The renewal of Russian-Afghan military cooperation may contribute to a renewed rise in the **Ministry of Defence's** role in the conduct, and in particular, the implementation of Russia's policy towards Afghanistan.

### 3.2. The foundations of Russia's political influence in Afghanistan

Russia's relations with the new Afghan government which was created after the overthrow of the Taliban, and more broadly with Afghanistan's political elite, have not proceeded in a vacuum. In fact, Russia has a base of influence among the Afghan political elites which has been clearly shaped over several decades.

<sup>11</sup> See the decree by the President of the Russian Federation, [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru), 22 March 2011, *op.cit.* More on the characters and the role of Zamir Kabulov in M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'Mullah Omar gets a Russian visitor', *Asia Times online*, 24 March 2011: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/MC24Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/MC24Df01.html)

Russia's influence among the political and social elite of Afghanistan has been shaped over four historical periods:

- firstly, during the reign of King Zahir Shah (especially in the 60s), mainly in relation to the training of Afghans in Soviet civilian and military academies;
- secondly, after the communist coup in 1978, on the basis of cadres of the ruling Communist party (the Liberal Democratic Party of Afghanistan), who were educated in the USSR and closely associated it, as well as the defence and law enforcement institutions and the *Khadamat-e Etela'at-e Dawlati* or KHAD (the state security agency);
- thirdly, during the civil war, and especially the fight against the Taliban in the 1990s (particularly the Tajik and Uzbek members of the Northern Alliance commanders, who were generally supported by Russia);
- fourthly, this was supplemented by new individuals and groups who came into contact with Russia after the overthrow of the Taliban.

As a consequence, the people who were once and/or now are linked to Russia, and/or who support closer cooperation with Moscow, may include representatives of different backgrounds:

- former activists of the Afghan communist party (LDPA), some of whom are still active politically (such as Said Mohammad Nurul Gulabzoy, Ulumi Khan, or Habib Mangal);
- some of the former Northern Alliance leaders, including Marshal Muhammad Qasim Fahim, a former chief of staff and intelligence for the Alliance, a former defence minister of Afghanistan, and currently first vice president; Yunus Qanuni, a former interior minister and former president of the lower house of parliament; Abdullah Abdullah, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and recent presidential candidate, and leader of the opposition Reform and Hope Party; General Abdul Rashid Dostum, one of the leaders of the Uzbek community; and former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani (murdered in September 2011);

- certain other former or present public officials in the Karzai government, including Vice President Ahmad Zia Masud; a former trade minister and head of the parliamentary committee on economy, Said Mustafa Kazimi;
- some Afghan businessmen and representatives of the Afghan diaspora in Russia (which is not very integrated, and does not itself constitute an influential lobby)<sup>12</sup>.

An important element of building up Russian influence in Afghanistan was and is the education and training of Afghan civilian and military personnel in Russia. According to Russian estimates, a total of over 15,000 Afghan citizens have been educated in Russia, of which about 1400 Afghans have graduated from Soviet civilian and military universities. Many of them became part of the political, business and security elites of independent Afghanistan. Moreover, after the overthrow of the Taliban, Russia has granted dozens of scholarships annually to students and Afghan government officials for education in Russian universities. For example, in 2004 there were 50 scholarships per year; 75 in 2007, and from 2008, 80 scholarships. For 2010, 100 scholarships were prepared, and 115 for 2011<sup>13</sup>. In 2011, about 400 Afghans were being educated at Russian universities at the same time<sup>14</sup>. The training of military personnel and officers from other services is a separate issue (see below).

The further expansion of Russian influence in the Afghan elite will undoubtedly be served by the planned reactivation of the Soviet-built University of Kabul. Russia has allotted about US\$2 million for this purpose, with a further \$4 million to be spent by Russia as part of international aid for the development of education in Afghanistan. The announced opening of the House of Russian Science and Culture in Kabul will have a similar effect.

<sup>12</sup> The Afghan diaspora in Russia is estimated at between 50,000 and 150,000 people (the lower number is more likely). For more, see Khomayun Kadiri, 'Afganskaya diaspora v Rossii', [www.afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru), 24 April 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Press conference of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov after meeting the Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Zalmay Rasul, Moscow 25 November 2011, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

<sup>14</sup> Information given by Sergey Prichod'ko, assistant to the president of the Russian Federation, [Afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru), 14 June 2011, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/20292.html>

However, the challenge for Russia remains how to make use of these instruments effectively. While it may be assumed that, thanks to its numerous and long-standing contacts, Moscow may learn much about the internal situation in Afghanistan, its ability to actively influence this situation is more questionable. This is because the politicians mentioned above (with the possible exception of Marshal Fahim, who is actually suspected of collaboration with the Russian secret services) are currently not very 'controllable' by Russia, and experts also believe that they have support from some other international actors (this pertains to Abdullah, Kanuni and Rabbani). The experience of Russian policy towards the Afghan government and its elites also demonstrates this.

## **4. Russia's humanitarian aid and economic presence in Afghanistan**

### **4.1. Russian humanitarian aid for Afghanistan**

Russia's image in Afghanistan was improved by the despatch there of significant Russian humanitarian aid. As early as 26 November 2001, a transport arrived in liberated Kabul with emergency rescuers from the Russian Ministry for Emergency Situations (MChS); they brought humanitarian supplies and a field hospital, which gave free medical care to the city's residents. Another field hospital was set up at the Bagram base near Kabul. Workers from MChS also built a crossing over the Panj river border, and opened up a passageway through a strategic tunnel under the Salang pass. According to Russian data, in 2002-2009 Russia sent humanitarian aid to Afghanistan worth US\$40 million<sup>15</sup>. In addition, in February 2009, Russia gave Afghanistan 18,000 tons of wheat flour worth US\$11 million. Also, in August 2009, a joint Russian/German project sent Afghanistan two MI-8 and MI-17 medical-rescue helicopters valued at US\$14 million (Russia financed half of the package). In 2009, 50 cars and two fire trucks were provided free of charge. A year later, subsequent shipments of wheat flour to the tune of US\$5 million were made. Plans have been laid to continue providing humanitarian aid; specifically, Russia plans to build a specialist children's hospital in Kabul.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with the Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksei Borodavkin for ITAR-TASS on 21 August 2009, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

In turn, according to Afghan data, official development assistance (ODA) from the Russian Federation in 2002-2009 amounted to US\$147 million (aid accounted for only 0.4% of the total international development assistance transferred to Afghanistan in this period; and Russia was only 18<sup>th</sup> among the countries and international structures that provided assistance, going beyond the purely humanitarian sphere and into the field of security)<sup>16</sup>.

## 4.2. Russian investments in Afghanistan

Since the interim Afghan government was set up, Russia has expressed interest in actively participating in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. Russia declared that its priority was to rebuild the destroyed economic sites which had been built during the Communist regime in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union built 142 such sites in Afghanistan, and the construction of 150 more was not completed. Russia has been particularly interested in investing in the energy, transport and construction sectors in the northern and central parts of Afghanistan.

So far, however, the number of significant economic projects and transactions carried out by or with the participation of Russian companies remains small, although the figure is slowly rising. The most important of them are as follows<sup>17</sup>:

- the modernisation of the Naglu hydroelectric power plant in Kabul province (a project initiated in 2007 by the contractor Technopromeksport, valued at US\$32.5 million, and scheduled for completion in early 2012);
- the construction of mini-hydro plants by the Inset company, in the provinces of Fayzabad (12 MW); Parwan (0.4 MW, US\$500,000); Paktia (0.4 MW, US\$400,000), Bamyán (50 kW, US\$100,000);

<sup>16</sup> Official data from Donor Financial Review. Report 1388, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Ministry of Finance, November 2009: [http://www.undp.org.af/Publications/KeyDocuments/Donor%27s FinancialReview% 20ReportNov2009.pdf](http://www.undp.org.af/Publications/KeyDocuments/Donor%27s%20FinancialReview%20ReportNov2009.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Rossiysko-afganskoye torgovo-ekonomicheskoye sotrudnichestvo (spravochnaya informatsiya), www.mid.ru, 27 February 2009.

- the sale before 2004 of 1000 UAZ cars to the the UN, and 500 Volga cars to the government of Afghanistan;
- sales in 2007 of Kamaz trucks and other equipment to the Ministry of Construction and the mayoralty of Kabul, for the sum of US \$10 million;
- sales in 2007 by a refinery in Omsk of 35,000 tons of gasoline.

In addition, the Russo-Afghan transport joint venture AFSOTR was reactivated in May 2008. Also, Russian specialists are building a 3G mobile communications network in northern Afghanistan. According to Russian data, Russian companies have invested over US\$34 million in total in Afghanistan over the period from 2006 to 2008; in 2007-2009, this amount was estimated at about US\$40 million<sup>18</sup>.

More investment is under discussion. In particular, the Zarubiezhttransstroy company is applying to modernise the strategically important Salang tunnel (the problem here is agreeing on the scope of the work and how to finance it<sup>19</sup>); and the Tupolev company, along with the Moscow Industrial Bank (MIB) wants to complete the construction of two TU-204 aircraft for air transport links with Russia (the value of this last project is US\$100 million). These projects will complement by the plans to reconstruct the Jalalabad channel with drainage facilities; construct a bridge over the Amu Darya river, and a transshipment base in the region of the Khayraton border crossing; and rebuild the power plants in Mazar-i-Sharif and Kilagay, as well as selected mills, elevators, and bakeries.

<sup>18</sup> 'O deyatelnosti TPP Rossii w 2010 g. na afganskom napravlenii': [www.tpp-inform.ru/userdata/1288001637.doc](http://www.tpp-inform.ru/userdata/1288001637.doc) For comparison, according to UNCTAD data, foreign direct investment (FDI) in Afghanistan in 2007-2009 totalled US\$728 million (which would mean that Russia would have accounted for 5.5% of that sum). Data from World Investment Report 2010: Investing in a low-carbon economy, New York, Geneva 2010, Annex table 1: [http://www.paiz.gov.pl/files/?id\\_plik=13221](http://www.paiz.gov.pl/files/?id_plik=13221)

<sup>19</sup> A memorandum on this issue was already signed in 2001. It was originally planned for Russia to be the main contractor, with the British and French as sponsors. But so far, no final agreement has been reached. Russia is interested in a comprehensive modernisation of the tunnel and the associated infrastructure, and money for the project is expected to come from international funds. This subject was revisited during President Karzai's visit to Moscow in January 2011. However, no binding decision has yet been taken.

Russia is also still interested in other important projects, particularly extracting oil and natural gas from Sheberghan deposits; extracting gold from the Shamti deposit on the border with Tajikistan; rebuilding the nitrogen plant in Mazar-i-Sharif, the cement plant in Pul-i-Kumri and the power system in Kabul; as well as in construction work and supplying technicians in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, and in Khost province<sup>20</sup>.

Russia seems to be giving its offer in the energy sphere high priority, including in particular the construction of high-voltage electrical cables for transmitting power from Tajikistan to Afghanistan (the CASA-1000 project; according to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, the Russian electricity company Inter RAO-YES is willing to invest US\$500 million if it becomes the operator of the project), the construction of similar links from Turkmenistan and within Afghanistan itself, and Gazprom's possible participation in the construction of the trans-Afghan TAPI pipeline (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India; see below), and the participation of Russian companies in building refinery plants in Sari Pul, Faryab and Balkh<sup>21</sup>.

However, Russia's economic involvement has hit some obstacles, and Russia has suffered defeats. The most significant economic defeat for Russia is the Tiazhpromeksport and Soyuzmetalriesurs companies' loss (to the China Metallurgical Group) of the lucrative tender to operate the Aynak copper deposits (worth US\$88 billion) over a 30-year period. Furthermore, in 2008 the Russian telecommunications company Megafon withdrew from the tender to privatise Afghan Telecom, citing the inflated price and security issues as reasons for doing so. In turn, in 2010 the Moscow Industrial Bank (MIB) withdrew from the tender for the controlling stake in the Kabul Combine Construction and cement plant in Jab-ul-Siradj, and from plans to build a 10 MW hydroelectric power plant in the

<sup>20</sup> Information from 'O deyatelnosti TPP v 2010 g...', *op. cit.*; Joint statement by the President of the Russian Federation Dmitri A. Medvedev and the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan H. Karzai, Moscow, 20 January 2011, [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru).

<sup>21</sup> Joint declaration..., *op. cit.*; I. Tulyakov, 'Vierniotsa li Rossiya v Afganistan?' *Pravda*, 24 January 2011; 'W ozhydanii rossiysko-afganskoy perezagruzki', [www.afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru), 18 January 2011; 'Rossiya i Afganistan rasshyriayut sotrudnichestvo v energeticheskoy sfere', [www.afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru), 3 May 2011.



region of the Salang tunnel (the project's total value was US\$100 million). They said that they could not meet the conditions which the Afghan side imposed. The MIB has also suspended the opening of its branch in Afghanistan for the time being<sup>22</sup>.

Usually Russian representatives officially give two main causes for the problems connected with investing in Afghanistan: (until 2007) Afghanistan's debt to Russia, which supposedly for formal reasons prevents state support for loans and investments, as well as the unstable security situation in Afghanistan, and the associated fears of Russian companies of entering the Afghan market. The other cited explanations sound more credible, in particular the Afghan government's reluctance to open the market up to Russian capital, as well as fierce competition (especially from China, Pakistan and Iran) on the Afghan market. The Afghan government has preferred to construct new business sites, using modern technology, rather than rebuild the outdated post-Soviet facilities with the help of Russian specialists. Russian businessmen, in turn, have complained about the lack of support for them from the Russian government, including access to loans. Another problem was the delay in signing the Russian-Afghan intergovernmental agreement on trade and economic cooperation (which was first announced in 2007); this delay revealed the problems involved in bringing the parties together regarding the specific conditions for cooperation. Eventually the agreement and the related action plan were signed on 20 January 2011 during President Karzai's visit to Russia. One element of this was the announcement that a Russian-Afghan commission on trade and economic cooperation was being set up; the agreement on this was signed on 14 June this year, and its chairmen are the Russian energy minister Sergei Shmatko and Afghanistan's finance minister Omar Zakhiwal.

Some hope for a breakthrough in investment appeared with the international conference on support for Afghanistan in London in January 2010. Russia presented the conference (and previously the NATO–Russia Council) with its pro-

<sup>22</sup> Information from 'O deyatelnosti TPP v 2010 g...', *op. cit.* The projects mentioned were once again mentioned on the list of proposed Russian investments in the Joint Statement signed during President Karzai's visit to Moscow in January 2011. See the 'Joint statement...', *op. cit.*

posal for Russian companies to comprehensively reconstruct and modernise the former Soviet economic facilities in Afghanistan. However, Russia also announced that it expected this plan to be financed from international aid funds for Afghanistan (specifically from countries which had not participated in the hostilities), and that Russian companies would receive contracts without having to compete in tenders. The Russian proposals were received without enthusiasm<sup>23</sup>. Hope was re-awakened by President Karzai's visit to Moscow on 20-21 January 2011, during which the Afghan leader enthusiastically invited Russian capital to invest in Afghanistan, including in the energy sphere; at the same time he mentioned Afghanistan's readiness to significantly increase its imports of Russian oil products.

### 4.3. Trade and the problem of debt

Russian-Afghan trade has been unimpressive, but did start to rise significantly as of 2008 (according to some data, annual turnover in 2000-2003 ranged between US\$16-37 million, then rose in 2004 to about US\$81 million; and then declined until 2006, to US\$15 million, to rise again in 2007 to US\$68 million; in 2008 it jumped to about US\$190 million)<sup>24</sup>. In 2009, according to some sources, the numbers fell sharply<sup>25</sup>; according to others (the Russian Federal Customs Service), trade continues to rise (up to US\$352 million in 2009, and US\$456 million in the first 10 months of 2010<sup>26</sup>). During his Moscow visit in January 2011, President Karzai said that annual turnover amounted to about US\$500 million. In trade,

<sup>23</sup> See 'Rossiya sobirayetsia vosstanavlivat' Afganistan na zapadnye dengi', *Kommersant*, 27 January 2010: [kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1311061](http://kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1311061); Interview with Ambassador of the Russian Federation to NATO Dmitri Rogozin, for the daily *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 27 January 2010: [www.kp.ru/daily/24431/599738/](http://www.kp.ru/daily/24431/599738/)

<sup>24</sup> Russian and Afghan figures, cited by the Russian Federation's former head of commercial representation in Kabul, Valery Ivanov, after 'Tovarooborot mezhdru Afganistanom i Rossiyei udvoilsa', [www.afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru). More statistics (until 2007) come from the Russian Federation's State Committee of Statistics; yet more from the Russian Foreign Ministry for 2007-8 (US\$381 million) based on the Afghan data. C.f. [www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru); 'Rossiysko-afganskoye torgovo-ekonomicheskoye sotrudnichestvo (spravochnaya informatsiya)', [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru), 27 February 2009.

<sup>25</sup> According to V. Ivanov, over 9 months of 2009 these amounted to only 29 million dollars; figures from [www.afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru), 12 November 2009.

<sup>26</sup> FTS data from T. Abdullayev, 'Afghanistan – svobodny rynok', *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 24 January 2011: <http://www.rg.ru/2011/01/24/afghanistan.html>

Russia had a significant balance surplus, exporting about US\$176 million to Afghanistan in 2008 (mainly fuel and lubricants, wood and timber products, metal products, food, transportation, machinery & equipment, and pharmaceuticals), and only importing about US\$14 million (mainly fruits, raisins and carpets). In the first 10 months of 2010, exports reached around US\$439 million, while imports came to about US\$17 million. The growth in turnover contributed to improving Russian-Afghan relations, as did the resolution of the problem of Afghan debt to Russia. Meanwhile, according to the IMF, Russia was Afghanistan's fifth largest partner in imports 2010 (€222.6 million, 4% of total imports), and the sixth biggest in exports (€10.1 million, 2.9% of total exports)<sup>27</sup>.

Since the beginning of 2004 talks with Afghanistan on settling post-Soviet debt (totalling approximately US\$12 billion, largely due to the supply of Soviet arms to the pro-Communist government in Kabul) have been intensified. The new Afghan government long refused to recognise this debt, for obvious reasons; but Russia was insistent, offering to write the debt off almost completely, on condition that it was converted into participation by Russian companies in economic projects and joint venture assets in Afghanistan. Moscow saw this as an opportunity to significantly increase its economic presence in Afghanistan. In the end, an intergovernmental agreement on this was signed on 6 August 2007. This cancelled the vast majority of the US\$11.1 billion debt which Afghanistan had incurred to Russia for the old Soviet arms supplies, and to a minor degree, from the settlement of trade clearing schemes. Russia broke up the remaining US\$730 million (after reduction) of the debt into instalments, to be repaid over a 23-year period<sup>28</sup>. In 2010 the debt, which had then reached US\$891 million, was completely written off by Russia<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> IMF data from Afghanistan's trade with main partners (2010), the European Commission, DG Trade, 8 June 2011: [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc\\_114134.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_114134.pdf)

According to this data, Afghanistan's main partners in imports are: the United States (31.8%), Pakistan (20.6%), the EU (13.2%) and India (7%); in exports: India (24.6%), Pakistan (23.8%), the USA (16.8%), the EU (12.6%), and Tajikistan (8.9%).

<sup>28</sup> 'Rossiysko-afganskoye...', *op.cit.*, www.mid.ru, 27 February 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Speech by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at an international conference in Kabul on July 20, 2010: <http://www.mid.ru/ns-rasia.nsf/1083b7937ae580ae432569e7004199c2/432569d80021985fc3257766004b3739?OpenDocument>

Russian-Afghan relations have been somewhat hindered by the actions taken in Russia itself against Afghan small market traders (among others), in particular the closure on 31 July 2009 of the *Sevastopol shopping centre* in Moscow (where approximately 500 small businesses from Afghanistan were operating), on charges of selling illegal goods. The traders' complaints have been taken up by Afghanistan's parliament.

On the other hand, initiatives have been undertaken to boost economic exchanges. These include the Afghan Business centre (representing the Afghan Chamber of Commerce), which was opened in Moscow in September 2010 with the support of the Russian Chamber of Commerce; its aim is to foster the economic exchange and business activity on both markets.

#### 4.4. International infrastructure projects

Another element of Russia's economic policy towards Afghanistan was its attitude towards large international infrastructure projects in energy and transport, with Afghanistan's participation<sup>30</sup>. Since the 1990s Russia has consistently sought to torpedo some of these projects, which it sees as posing threats to its own interests. Specifically, this concerns the oil pipeline which is projected to run from the Pakistani port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea, through Afghanistan to China's Xinjiang province (which may reduce China's interest in importing oil from Russia), as well as the projected gas pipeline with a capacity of 33 billion m<sup>3</sup> to run from Dowletabad in Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan to Fazilka in India (known as the TAPI pipeline, 1800 km in length, which should help further diversify exports of Turkmenistan's gas). However, the change of circumstances caused by the world economic crisis of 2008/2009, especially Russia's lack of interest in importing more gas from Turkmenistan, as well as the conclusion of a long-term contract to supply Russian oil to China, contributed to a revision of Russia's stance towards the TAPI. In particular, in 2010 Russia began sig-

<sup>30</sup> For more, see e.g. 'Mezhdunarodnyje otnosheniya v Tsentralnoy Azii w 2000-kh godakh', in A. Bogaturov, A. Dundich, Y. Troitski, Tsentralnaya Aziya 'Otlozhenny neytralitet' i mezhdunarodnyje otnosheniya v Tsentralnoy Azii w 2000-kh godakh, Moscow, 2010; Mohamed Daud, 'Afganskiy rynek izmenit geoekonomicheskiy status Srednego Vostoka', [www.afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru), 22 October 2010.

nalling its readiness to participate in the project<sup>31</sup>, and during President Karzai's visit to Moscow in January 2011, representatives of Russia led by President Medvedev lobbied publicly for Gazprom to participate in the project. In this case, Moscow's intention may be to divert natural gas exports from Turkmenistan to the south-east, in order to reduce the likelihood of it being exported to Europe (which would compete with Russian exports onto this lucrative market) or China (where Russia wants to compete with Central Asian gas with its own *de facto* planned supplies), as well as to gain the potential revenue from the construction. Either way, Russia would have an impact on Turkmenistan's important infrastructure projects and export policy. Russia has hitherto habitually supported projects for developing transport along the north-south line.

## 5. Russian aid to Afghanistan in the security sphere

Because the Afghan army and security forces still use post-Soviet equipment, Russia assumed that it would play a significant role in reconstructing them. Representatives of the Russian government repeatedly made declarations to that effect from 2002. However, Russia encountered growing obstacles from Afghanistan on the matter, mainly due to US pressure. Russian dissatisfaction with this, and the general cooling of relations between Russia and the West, can be attributed to the fact that in 2005 Russia stopped delivering free equipment to Afghanistan's defence and law enforcement institutions. Russia was apparently expecting to continue this cooperation on a commercial basis. Prospects in this area began to become clearer after the settlement of Afghanistan's debt in 2007, and after an initial agreement to make such deliveries was concluded with the US

<sup>31</sup> Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin stated this in Ashgabat on 22 October 2010. See 'Rossiya proydot cherez Afganistan': <http://www.gazeta.ru/business/2010/10/22/3430957.shtml>; see also 'V ozhdanii ...', *op.cit.* This even became one of the main causes of tension in relations between Russia and Turkmenistan, which did not hide its scepticism about this prospect. It is true that early on in the TAPI plan, the Russian company did formally join the international consortium (the memorandum was signed in 1995; Gazprom subjects were supposed to get up to 10% of the shares), but this was rather dictated by the desire to control work on the project, or the private benefits of the managers associated with Gazprom. However, the project is dependent on the stabilisation of the situation in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Russia is prepared to participate in a competitive pipeline running from Iran-Pakistan (and possibly to India).

in 2008. In November that year, President Karzai appealed to Russian President Medvedev for military-technical cooperation to resume. President Medvedev's response in January 2009 was positive but vague (the Russian president expressed his readiness to continue cooperation, but noted that it would be necessary to agree on detailed conditions). Russia had probably hoped to make the sales via the US, even though it was aware that Washington was increasingly counting on rearming the Afghan army with Western hardware. However, due to the 'reset' in Russian-American relations, Russia decided to resume its limited free supply of arms to Afghanistan in 2010; this was probably a political investment, both in regard to Afghanistan and to the US.

### 5.1. Arms deliveries

During the fighting with the Taliban regime, Russia was the main provider of weapons and military equipment to the Northern Alliance, and did not stop its military and technical assistance after the creation of the new Afghan government at the end of 2001. Russian assistance in this area took the forms of free supplies of equipment and materials for military use; the limited commercial supply of arms and military equipment (mainly funded by the US); and training for officers and specialists from the defence & law enforcement institutions and other Afghan services (mostly the anti-narcotics agency). Some of the latter was free of charge, and some financed by foreign sources.

As for the free hardware and material aid for Afghanistan's defence & law enforcement institutions from 2002 to 2005 (when it was halted), its value exceeded US\$300 million (according to the former head of the Russian trade mission in Kabul, Valery Ivanov; other Russian diplomats estimate the figure at US\$200-220 million)<sup>32</sup>. According to Russian information, this aid included equipment

<sup>32</sup> V. Ivanov, 'Podpisaniye soglasheniya ob uregulirovaniy zadolzhennosti – shag k razvitiyu otnosheniy', [www.afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru), 29 August 2007: <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/9800.html>; Zamir Kabulov, 'Rossiya gotova okazat' pomoshch v ustanovlenii afganskoy armii', [www.afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru), 4 March 2009. It is difficult to compare the scale of this assistance to US involvement, which, according to official data during the budget years of 2002-2010, allocated about US\$34.7 billion to help the Afghan army and security forces (including in the fight against drugs), of which around US\$29 billion went on the armed forces. Calculations based on C. Turnoff, *Afghanistan: US Foreign Assistance*, Congressional Research Service, 12 August 2010: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40699.pdf>

and a complex missile defence system for Kabul airport, communication equipment, SUVs, trucks, repair shops, spare parts for military equipment, and technical manuals. In addition, eight Afghan MI helicopters were repaired for free (2003), as were 4 AN military transport aircraft. In 2005, Afghanistan was supposed to receive four MI-8 transport helicopters.

From available public sources, it is known that Afghanistan has received Russian heavy military equipment; in particular, on the basis of an agreement on military cooperation from 1992, Afghanistan was to receive 50 T-55 and T-62 tanks, 80 BTR and BWP transporters, anti-aircraft batteries, howitzers, and Grad, Fagot and Malutka rocket launchers<sup>33</sup>.

Talks on Russia resuming its free supply of weapons, especially helicopters and small arms, to Afghan defence & law enforcement institutions were held between Russia and the US & NATO from 2007. Yet Russia has consistently taken the position that the Afghan forces may receive no more than three Russian helicopters for free, and that the remaining 18 units should be financed by the United States and possibly other coalition partners<sup>34</sup>. In 2009, Afghanistan was supposed to receive two MI transport helicopters from Russia. In March 2010, information emerged about plans to create a trust fund within NATO for the delivery of Russian helicopters. Over time, however, it turned out that no-one was willing to make financial contributions to this fund, and its goal was limited mainly to financing pilot training and technical maintenance<sup>35</sup>. A decision on this matter was taken during the NATO-Russia summit in Lisbon on 20 November 2010<sup>36</sup>. Meanwhile, discussions with the US on commercial deliveries ended with the signing on 26 May 2011 of a contract between Rosoboronexport and the US Army command to purchase 21 new Russian MI-17 transport heli-

<sup>33</sup> Data is based on unpublished material from Andrzej Wilk of the CES, taken from Russian information agencies.

<sup>34</sup> Information based on author's interviews with Russian experts and a representative of NATO Headquarters in September-October 2010.

<sup>35</sup> See the press conference given by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov after meeting the Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Zalmay Rasul, *op.cit.*

<sup>36</sup> A. Fiediashin, 'Kakoy tsenoj Rossiya gotova spasti NATO w Afganistanie?', RIA Novosti, 2 November 2010; RIA Novosti, 3 November 2010: <http://www.rian.ru/world/20101103/292200227.html>

copters for the air force in Afghanistan. The contract (with a value estimated by commentators at over US\$300 million), provides not only for the supply of helicopters (the first batch in October 2011, the next in 2012), but also the delivery of spare parts and maintenance<sup>37</sup>. Furthermore, in early June 2011, Russia and the US announced the planned establishment of a maintenance centre for Russian helicopters on Afghan territory<sup>38</sup>.

Russia has also begun to supply Afghanistan with arms and ammunition. The first, larger batch of weapons for the Afghan Interior Ministry (20,000 Kalashnikovs and 2.5 million pieces of ammunition) was delivered in early November 2010, on the basis of a bilateral agreement with Afghanistan. Russia has planned to make 16 more such deliveries.

## 5.2. Training assistance

As for training programs for the Afghan defence and law enforcement institutions, Russian information states that Russian military academies trained over 300 Afghan officers free of charge in the period from 2002 to 2005<sup>40</sup> (after this period, it is most likely that this type of training was stopped). This training was conducted at the Military Academy of Communications in St Petersburg and at the military repair plants in Omsk and Ryazan, among other locations.

Moreover, as part of the international NATO-Russia Council (which was agreed upon in December 2005, and became a permanent project in February 2008), short training in how to combat illicit drug smuggling was given to 102 Afghan anti-narcotics specialists between 2006 and August 2009 at the Interior Mini-

<sup>37</sup> *Communiqué* from the Federal Service for military-technical cooperation (FSVTS) of 30 May 2011, [www.fsvts.gov.ru](http://www.fsvts.gov.ru). For the deal to be possible, the US sanctions on the Russian arms export monopolist, the Rosoboronexport company, were lifted in May 2010.

<sup>38</sup> This was reported by the deputy director of the Federal Service for military-technical cooperation (FSVTS) Vyacheslav Dzirkalns. *Lenta.ru*, 6 March 2011.

<sup>39</sup> 'Torgovlya idet', *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 28 October 2010: [www.mk.ru/economics/article/2010/10/28/540136-togovlya-idet.html](http://www.mk.ru/economics/article/2010/10/28/540136-togovlya-idet.html); RIA Novosti, 2 November 2010: [http://www.rian.ru/defence\\_safety/20101102/291783500.html](http://www.rian.ru/defence_safety/20101102/291783500.html)

<sup>40</sup> Borodavkin cited the figure of 160. Interview with Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksei Borodavkin for ITAR-TASS, 21 August 2009, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).



stry's All-Russian Institute for Advance Training at Domodedovo near Moscow<sup>41</sup>. At the NATO-Russia summit in Lisbon in November 2010, consensus was reached on expanding training for Afghan anti-narcotics officers; this included plans to start training in a second Russian centre, at St Petersburg. In 2010, plans were made to train a total of 225 officers from Afghanistan in Russia<sup>42</sup>.

In addition, as part of these international projects, Russian specialists from the MChS ran training for Afghan de-mining engineers in Spain from April 2002, and in late 2002 they were seconded to Switzerland for a similar purpose, to the Swiss-financed De-Mining Centre, which was founded at Russia's initiative.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Borodavkin for ITAR-TASS, *op.cit.*

<sup>42</sup> Lavrov's press conference after meeting with Rasul, *op.cit.*

### III. Russia and the US/NATO operations in Afghanistan

#### 1. Russia's attitude towards the Afghan operation

##### 1.1. Russia on the initial phase of the operation

After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Moscow was aware that the USA and Britain would inevitably take military action against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and did nothing to stop them. For some time, however, Moscow was undecided on whether (or if so, how) to support the emerging international anti-terrorist coalition. It seems that the decisive factor in determining their decision was the public declarations of support for the coalition by most countries in Central Asia, which came in mid-September, together information about the Uzbek-US consultations on the use of military bases in Uzbekistan for operations in Afghanistan. Moscow's decision was made after a meeting between then-President Vladimir Putin and the heads of the institutions of force in Sochi on 22 September 2001, and was publicly announced two days later. Russia declared that it would open up air corridors for humanitarian aid shipments to Afghanistan; that it would share intelligence information on terrorist activities with the coalition members; that it would lend assistance in search and rescue actions; increase Russian military aid to the Northern Alliance's forces; and make its airports available, *via* the Central Asian states, to the coalition forces. At the same time, however, leading Russian officials and the heads of the defence & law enforcement institutions held intensive consultations in the Central Asian countries which were essentially aimed at limiting the Western military presence in the region and strengthening cooperation between these countries in Russia's security sphere<sup>43</sup>.

The Russian contribution to the military victory over the Taliban in 2001 was primarily based on large arms deliveries to the Northern Alliance, which helped it (along with American and British bombing) to carry out a successful offensive and occupy a large part of Afghanistan, including Kabul. In the political

<sup>43</sup> For more, see Eurasia after 11 September, OSW Bulletin, No. 1, 2001.

field, however, there were clearly elements of rivalry with the West over the shape of the new Afghan government and the orientation of the Afghan state (see above).

## **1.2. Russia's general attitude towards the international forces in Afghanistan**

Russia supported the December 2001 UN Security Council resolution setting up the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF). In Moscow's eyes, this was a kind of military counterweight to the US-British coalition. From the beginning, however, Russia stressed that any foreign forces in Afghanistan must remain there only temporarily, solely to ensure security, and to complete their mission as quickly as possible, as soon as the Afghan army and security forces have been rebuilt, which should be the priority. The same applied to the Western military presence in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan<sup>44</sup>.

As early as the beginning of 2002, Russia already began signalling its concern that the Western military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia might be extended<sup>45</sup>. However, it decided not to create obstacles to the activities of the anti-terrorism coalition. Moscow voted in favour of successive UN Security Council resolutions prolonging the ISAF's mandate. Moreover, despite public displays of criticism, Russia also supported the 2003 extension of the ISAF's mandate, its number of forces and its geographical scope (beyond Kabul); nor did Moscow oppose NATO's takeover of the command in August 2003. It seems that this compliance was dictated by two considerations. First, Russia was aware that Afghan forces are not, and will long remain, unable independently to provide security in the country (which was also one of the conditions for increasing Russia's economic presence). Secondly, Moscow thus demonstrated its support for a central UN role in the regulation of crises (the ISAF was acting on the basis of a mandate from the UNSC), and gave the West a positive example (against the background of the negative cases of Yugoslavia and Iraq). In other words: Only actions which include Russia as a co-decider can be effective.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. The Russian Federation's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' statement of 21 December 2001, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

<sup>45</sup> The first public signal of this was the speech by the head of the Russian Federation's Federal Border Service, General Konstantin Totski, in January 2002; cf. Eurasia after 11 September, OSW Bulletin, *op.cit.*

Russia had expressed its critical attitude towards the coalition (and indeed the USA) in 2005, when the SCO's 5 July summit in Astana led to a joint declaration (initiated by Russia along with China) calling for a timetable for the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan and the Central Asian bases.

Especially since 2007, Russian assessments of the effects of the coalition's actions in Afghanistan have become increasingly critical and expressed in public. The coalition is accused of being ineffective in ensuring security, and above all in the fight against the illegal production and export of drugs. Russia has also begun to denounce cases of accidental attacks by coalition forces on the civilian population. All this was related on one hand to manifestations of Russia's cooling relations with the US, and on the other to its increasing political support for Karzai's government in Afghanistan (which was especially apparent after 2007).

Finally, in February 2009, Russian pressures and incentives led to the termination of Kyrgyzstan's agreement with the United States on stationing their air base at Manas international airport near Bishkek. However, the Kyrgyz-American talks ended in June 2009 with a further agreement to station US forces at the so-called Manas transit centre (with a revised mandate and for higher fees). The Manas case was one of the reasons why Russia withdrew its political support for the then President of Kyrgyzstan Kurmanbek Bakiyev, and for its rapid support for the opposition that toppled him in April 2010. Moscow expected the new Kyrgyz government's attitude toward Manas to be guided by Russia's position, as they apparently wanted more direct influence on how the transit centre functioned<sup>46</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> For more, see W. Górecki, Russia's position on the events in Kyrgyzstan (April – June 2010), OSW Commentary No. 38, 27 July 2010; <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2010-07-27/russias-position-events-kyrgyzstan-april-june-2010>. Russia affects the functioning of the Manas base by supplying aviation fuel (via a chain of opaque intermediaries linked to successive Kyrgyz governments). In mid-2010, formal talks began on the Russian company Gazpromneft formally acquiring some of the supply contracts to Manas. See 'US-Russia discussing groundbreaking Manas fuel-supply deal', Eurasianet.org, 21 June 2010: [www.eurasianet.org/node/61361](http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61361); 'Gazprom gotov vzat na sebya rol postavshchika topliva dla tsentra Manas', oilcapital.ru, 27 October 2010: [www.oilcapital.ru/news/2010/10/271248\\_160217.shtml](http://www.oilcapital.ru/news/2010/10/271248_160217.shtml). It seems that the suggestions which Kyrgyz Prime Minister Almazbek Atambayev has been making since spring 2011 about a possible Russian takeover of the management of the Manas centre were a response to Russian pressure.

On the other hand, Russia gradually began increasing its support for the ISAF mission by facilitating transport and transit (see below). This was Russia's specific way of politically investing in its relations with individual Western countries and NATO, and which also had a sound financial motivation: commercial support for the transport paid very well for Russia.

### 1.3. The drug problem

The problem of the illegal production and export of drugs (mainly heroin) from Afghanistan to Russia, and the ISAF's attitude towards this problem, has gradually become an increasingly important element of Russian policy on the coalition's mission.

Russia has specifically emphasised that despite the growing Western military presence in Afghanistan, and the process of reconstructing the Afghan armed forces and security forces, not only has illegal drug production in Afghanistan not decreased, but has in fact risen significantly. According to data cited by the head of the FDCS, Viktor Ivanov, opium production in Afghanistan has risen forty-fold over the past nine years (from 185 tonnes in 2001 to about 7600 tonnes). This assessment, however, is based on manipulated data<sup>47</sup>.

Russia has pointed out that a significant portion of drugs from Afghanistan have reached Russia via illegal routes through Central Asia (and revenue from their sales in Russia runs at around US\$13 billion); this has contributed to an increase in drug consumption, which has become a serious social problem in the Russian Federation. According to Ivanov, illegal narcotics kill 30,000 Russians each year<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> At first, the year 2001 was exceptional, because the Taliban government launched their campaign against opium production after the year 2000 (as a result of which it fell sharply from about 3000 tons per year). Secondly, according to reliable estimates by the UNDP, opium production in Afghanistan since 2009 has fallen (by about 10% in 2009 to 6900 tonnes, and in 2010 by 48%, down to 3600 tons). Data from Afghanistan Opium Survey 2010, UNDP, September 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Data from a speech by V. Ivanov at the NATO-Russia meeting on 24 March 2010; [www.sfo.fskn.gov.ru/news/61/](http://www.sfo.fskn.gov.ru/news/61/)

For this reason, Russia has increasingly often and sharply criticised the ISAF for its insufficient activity, and even its inaction, against the illegal production and export of narcotics in Afghanistan. There have been suggestions that the Western forces in Afghanistan are deliberately ignoring this threat, as they do not want to provoke anti-Western sentiment in Afghan society (part of which relies on poppy cultivation for their subsistence). Some Russian experts have even made allegations that coalition forces have been directly supporting illegal drug production and trafficking in Afghanistan<sup>49</sup>.

Russia has ever more insistently demanded that fighting drug production and trafficking become a priority for the ISAF in Afghanistan. At the NATO-Russia Council Forum in March 2010, the head of the FDCS Viktor Ivanov even put forward a very ambitious and comprehensive plan of cooperation covering the political, legal, economic and security spheres (the Rainbow-2 plan)<sup>50</sup>. In June 2011, during a visit to Brussels, he called for the creation of an EU/Russia joint agency which would take up the fight against drugs in Eurasia, in cooperation with the UN and the CSTO<sup>51</sup>.

It seems that the rise in the importance of the drug problem resulted on one hand from the real growth of this problem for Russia, but on the other hand, it was to a great extent treated instrumentally. Firstly, this was a way to force through cooperation in the security sphere with the Central Asian states and China, including within the CSTO and STO, which are structures Russia dominates, as also served the purpose to push the West, including NATO, to establish for-

<sup>49</sup> Conversations with Russian experts in September 2010.

<sup>50</sup> He called for the following: recognition by the UN Security Council of the Afghan drug problem as a threat to international peace and security; the implementation of a comprehensive plan for the reconstruction and economic development of Afghanistan; increasing the efficiency of destroying poppy crops in Afghanistan; imposing UN sanctions on tribal warlords who support poppy cultivation; revising the ISAF's mandate by introducing compulsory destruction of poppy crops; raising confidence in the exchange of sensitive anti-narcotic information; coordinating the training of Afghan drug services; and the creation of an international agency for the liquidation of drug production in Afghanistan. Ivanov's speech at a meeting of the NATO-Russia council..., *op.cit.* See also Ivanov's speech at a meeting of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Afghanistan of the National Drugs Committee, 14 February 2011, [www.fskn.gov.ru](http://www.fskn.gov.ru).

<sup>51</sup> See Ivanov's speech at the conference in the European Parliament; [http://fskn.gov.ru/includes/periodics/speeches\\_fskn/2011/0627/050313592/detail.shtml](http://fskn.gov.ru/includes/periodics/speeches_fskn/2011/0627/050313592/detail.shtml)

mal cooperation with the CSTO. Secondly, this was clearly an element of the FDCCS head Viktor Ivanov's self-promotion, as he exploited this problem to strengthen his own position in the Russian ruling elite as well as his influence on Russian foreign policy.

As for multilateral cooperation on the drug question in Central Asia, in 2000 Russia initiated the adoption of UN resolutions and other documents calling for the creation of so-called 'anti-narcotic security belts' around Afghanistan. Since then, this has become a constant demand of Russian diplomacy, which over time has been expanded to include financial security (i.e. preventing anyone from profiting from illegal drug trafficking). According to the Russian concept, one of these 'security belts' was to have been created on Afghanistan's border with the countries of Central Asia, and another in Central Asia (preferably on the border between Russia and Kazakhstan). In connection with this, Russia lobbied for financial support for a unit of Russian border guards to be stationed (up to October 2005) on the Tajik-Afghan border. This support was to come from international sources, and to a limited extent, such support was provided. Russia's hope was that the West would find it necessary to maintain or even increase the Russian military presence in the border areas of Central Asia. Moreover, the fight against drug trafficking has become an area of cooperation within the CSTO and SCO, and since 2003 an annual preventive CSTO operation codenamed 'Channel' (which started as a Russian initiative) has been held, to which Russia has invited representatives of Afghanistan and NATO countries (Kabul and individual NATO countries have delegated representatives on an *ad hoc* basis). In December 2010, an agreement was signed on multilateral cooperation in combating the drug trade by the 'quartet' of Russia, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. In May 2011, at the initiative of Russian President Dmitri Medvedev (who announced it at an SCO summit in Tashkent the previous June), a draft SCO Drug Strategy and plan of action was prepared. Russia also lobbied for a UN Security Council resolution that would deem the production of and trade in Afghan drugs as a threat to international peace and security. This could have created a formal basis for a hypothetical military intervention in the region. In connection with discussions to extend the Russian-Tajik agreement on cooperation in protecting the border with Afghanistan (from 2004), Moscow also began to publicly demand that a contingent (according to some information, numbering up to 3000 soldiers) of the Russian Federal Border Service return to the Tajikistan/Afgaha-

nistan border, a move which was primarily motivated by the increase of drug smuggling across that border<sup>52</sup>.

The FDCS and its head Viktor Ivanov were among the main actors in Russian policy toward Afghanistan in the period from 2009 to 2010. Thanks to their numerous international contacts and agreements, the role of the FDCS in Russia's relations with the United States clearly rose in importance; for example, Ivanov became joint leader of one of the working groups of the Russian-American presidential committee for cooperation. The FDCS also worked closely with selected European and Central Asia countries, China, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan itself, and some of its other neighbours. Proof that this role was becoming more important was the first joint anti-narcotics operation carried out in Afghanistan, on 27-28 October 2010 in Nangarhar province; 4 FDCS officers were joined by 70 officers of the American anti-narcotics agency and the Afghan Interior Ministry<sup>53</sup>. Further joint operations like this were conducted in December 2010 and February 2011<sup>54</sup>.

The Afghan drug problem was and remains one of the points of contention between Russia (which advocates a principled and unconditional fight against poppy cultivation for the production of drugs, including by destroying the poppy harvest with chemicals sprayed from the air) and the Western coalition partners, who emphasise the need for a comprehensive approach to this problem, including offering the people of Afghanistan economically attractive alternatives to guarantee their livelihood and their basic security<sup>55</sup>. However, it seems that

<sup>52</sup> See Ivanov's statement on 5 May 2011, [www.afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru), 6 May 2011; Reuters, 4 May 2011.

<sup>53</sup> During the operation, four laboratories were detected and about a tonne of heroin was seized. The operation initially sparked criticism from Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who said that the Afghan authorities had not been forewarned about it (but Karzai quickly withdrew his criticism and praised the action). Cf. 'Makovy suverenitet podkoshen Afganistan', *Kommersant*, 1 November 2010, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?fromsearch=2fa83ac2-6561-412b-befc-1fbf6e35d8bc&docsid=1532357>. According to information obtained from a Russian expert, the Russian Foreign Ministry were not aware of the operation before it happened.

<sup>54</sup> Information from Viktor Ivanov, Interfax, 4 July 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. [www.lenta.ru/news/2010/03/25/reject/](http://www.lenta.ru/news/2010/03/25/reject/); [www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2010/03/25/n\\_1474561.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2010/03/25/n_1474561.shtml); D. Tutakayev, 'Oruzhye makovogo porazheniya', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 12 March 2010; [www.nwo.ng.ru/printed/237903](http://www.nwo.ng.ru/printed/237903)



both parties' positions on this issue are coming together, as they are focusing on the fight against drug-producing laboratories and warehouses, and on cutting the supply routes for the so-called 'precursors' (the chemicals used for production), exports of the drugs themselves, and on combating the laundering of money derived from the drug trade<sup>56</sup>.

## 2. The issue of military transit through Russia to Afghanistan

Moscow has been selective about facilitating military transit through Russian territory to Afghanistan, in line with its own political interests. Individually, agreements have been signed with Russia's leading European partners on military transit to Afghanistan:

- on 9 October 2003, an agreement was concluded with Germany on the airborne transit of cargo and military troops to Afghanistan (and was put in practice in 2004);
- on 7 October 2004, a similar agreement was concluded with France (although Russia only ratified it in December 2010);
- on 2 October 2008, an agreement was signed with Germany on military transit by rail (which began operation in November that year);
- on 3 March 2009, an agreement on military transit by air was signed with Spain (which Russia ratified in December 2010);
- a similar agreement was signed with Italy on 16 February 2011.

Talks between Russia and NATO on transit, which had been ongoing since at least mid-2006, ended with limited success: on 4 April 2008 at the NATO sum-

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Richard Weitz, 'Russia returns to Afghanistan', [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com), 3 November 2010; [http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/11/03/russia\\_returns\\_to\\_afghanistan](http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/11/03/russia_returns_to_afghanistan); in this context, Russia's demands include the introduction of a tracking system for 'precursors' derived from Europe.

mit in Bucharest, Russia and NATO reached an agreement on non-military rail transit for the ISAF, and started to implement it in March 2009. The conclusion of the agreement was undoubtedly related to Russia's willingness to block further NATO enlargement to the east, and was intended to demonstrate that cooperation with Russia was a better alternative (including on Afghanistan, the key issue for NATO). However, Russia made any possible agreement to military transit for NATO conditional on the establishment of a formal relationship between NATO and the CSTO, a position upon which the Alliance has so far failed to reach consensus. However, in 2010 there were signs that the Russian position was easing. At the Russia-NATO summit on 20 November 2010, an agreement was concluded on so-called return transit (from Afghanistan through Russian territory) for NATO forces. At the same time, Moscow has agreed to include armoured personnel carriers in the transit agreement.

The Russian-American summit in Moscow on 6 July 2009 formally concluded an agreement (which Russia had initially agreed to in January 2009) on military air transit. The US announced that it planned about 4500 flights per year, which would save it around US\$133 million. Due to procedural problems on the Russian side, however, the agreement only came into full force as of January 2010 (even before Russia's formal ratification in March 2011). However, the number of flights was initially much lower than expected.

The agreement with the United States was a gesture from Russia towards the new Obama administration, which had pledged to make a positive breakthrough in its relations with Russia. Moscow apparently decided to use this as an argument that Washington must take account of key Russian interests.

### 3. Transport, non-military transit and other forms of support

Russian private companies have an almost monopolistic position on the **strategic airlift of cargo** for the coalition members. The largest share belongs to the Russian Volga-Dniepr company, with its vast AN-124 Ruslan transport aircraft; it has concluded a charter agreement with the coalition allies and NATO. The Russian-Ukrainian consortium Ruslan-SALIS (created by the Russian company Volga-Dniepr and Ukraine's Antonov company) hauled air transport for

the 16 NATO members (and 2 partner countries, Sweden and Finland) within NATO's Strategic Airlift Interim Solution (SALIS) programme from March 2006 until the end of 2010; its contract has now been extended until the end of 2012. Their contract provides for the availability of six AN-124 aircraft for transporting 'outsize' cargo. Under the program, about 1700 flights and 90,000 tonnes of cargo had been transported by the end of 2010. Russia has also proposed the use of IL-761 transport aircraft<sup>57</sup>.

Another consortium of the same companies, Ruslan International, made separate agreements for transport from the USA and Great Britain. Another Russian company which meets transport orders for the coalition forces is Polot, which uses AN-124 Ruslan aircraft. The Russian company Aviacon-Cargo performs transport services for the ISAF with IL-76 transport aircraft; the Russian company Vertikal-T charters helicopters. Based on publicly available information, it is impossible to estimate the total profit which Russian companies are making from the commercial implementation of transport services for the ISAF and other coalition forces; we can only assume that it amounts to hundreds of millions of dollars<sup>58</sup>.

In addition, Rosoboronekспорт provides Western contractors with specific spare parts for helicopters, aircraft and communication equipment of Russian origin<sup>59</sup>. The sale of four MI-17 attack helicopters, which the Polish contingent in ISAF used, was also important for Russia<sup>60</sup>. Moscow is also holding talks on the paid certification of aerospace manufacturers in NATO member states in Central and Eastern Europe to support MI-class helicopters under Russian license, in connection with the tender for the NATO agency NAMSA to buy MI-class helicopters<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with the FSWTS' deputy director V. Dzirkalns for the BBC's Russian section, 18 January 2011; interview with Dzirkalns for Interfax-AWN, 4 March 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Data is based on unpublished material by the CES's Natalia Orłowska-Chyz, from Russian agency reports and information from NATO; see. [www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_50106.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50106.htm). In addition, in 2001, the CIA bought two Mi-17 helicopters in Russia for its operations in Afghanistan. V. Avierkov, 'Rossiyskaya i sovetskaya aviatsyonnaya tiekhnika na sluzhbie NATO v Afganistanie', [www.afghanistan.ru](http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/15983.html), 11 November 2009; <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/15983.html>

<sup>59</sup> 'Torgovlya idet', *op.cit.*

<sup>60</sup> Fiediashin, 'Kakoy cenoy...', *op.cit.*

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Dzirkalns for Interfax-AWN, 4 March 2011.

Russia is gradually increasing its role in the transport of **non-military cargoes** for the NATO and US forces in Afghanistan. This is a key element of the so-called **Northern Distribution Network (NDN)**, whose participation in transit to Afghanistan is steadily rising, mainly at Pakistan's expense. In mid-2010 30% of cargo went *via* the NDN (65% of which runs through Russian territory); in May 2011, the NDN's share was already up to 60%, and the US has declared that it will rise to 75%<sup>62</sup>.

<sup>62</sup> US–Russia Relations: ‘Reset’ Fact Sheet, The White House, 24 June 2010, at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov); Statement by the Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics of the US Army, Mitchell Stevenson, ITAR-TASS, 23 May 2011.

## IV. Russia's regional activity concerning the Afghan question

### 1. The problem of Afghanistan in the CSTO and SCO

Even before 11 September 2001, Russia had been using the existing terrorist and narcotics threats from Afghanistan in its attempts to strengthen security cooperation with the Central Asian states and China, and to consolidate its influence in the region.

The threat of fundamentalism and terrorism linked to Afghanistan (including the so-called Batken crises in 1999 and 2000), the Central Asian countries' growing concern at the export of Islamic extremism from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and later the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and re-occurrences of terrorism in the region, have created a strong impetus for closer cooperation between the Central Asian states and China with Russia in the security sphere. Elements of this process include the following:

- the signing of agreements on military cooperation between Russia and selected countries in the region in autumn 1999;
- the formation at the end of 2000 of the CIS Anti-Terrorist Centre;
- the progressive institutionalisation of the Collective Security Treaty (which in 2003 was recast as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation) and the SCO, including the establishment of a CSTO Rapid Reaction Force in the Central Asian sector (2001), the CSTO Joint Staff (from 2004), the SCO's Regional Anti-terrorist Centre (from 2001) and the CSTO Joint Rapid Reaction Force (KSOR, as decided in February 2009);
- the growing Russian military presence in Central Asia (a new Russian base was set up in Chkalovsk, Tajikistan at the end of 2000; at Kant airport in Kyrgyzstan in September 2003); and
- Uzbekistan's accession to the SCO (2000) and the CSTO (again since 2006).

Talks about establishing a Russian base in southern Kyrgyzstan (in the Osh or Batken regions) and Russia's possible use of more military airfields in Tajikistan (especially the Ayni airport near Dushanbe) are also underway.

Moscow has exploited the growing illegal drug production and smuggling from Afghanistan to and *via* Central Asia and Russia for the same reasons, including by pushing the concept of anti-narcotic 'security belts', and by initiating the 'Channel' operation in 2003 (see above).

At Russia's initiative, both the SCO and the CSTO have set up structures for regular consultations on the Afghanistan question: within the SCO, a working group on Afghanistan was founded in 2005, and a similar working group within the CSTO was founded in 2006.

Russia has tried to bring Afghanistan into these multilateral cooperation initiatives. On 17 June 2004, President Karzai participated at Russia's initiative in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Tashkent for the first time. This move seems to have been intended to outline alternative international forums for the Afghan authorities, as opposed to working closely with Pakistan and Western countries. There was probably also another reason: an attempt to channel the ever-stronger influence (especially economic) of China in Afghanistan, which Russia regards with unease.

There were also other initiatives which served Afghanistan's involvement: The launching (again at Russia's initiative) in 2006 of a Russian-NATO training programme for anti-narcotics professionals from Central Asia and Afghanistan (Russia's original intent was for this to be a part of cooperation between NATO and the CSTO, but the Alliance did not agree to this); the involvement of Afghan officers in the CSTO's 'Channel' operation in 2007, and the joint declaration and Plan of Action from the SCO states and Afghanistan in the fight against terrorism, drug trafficking and organised crime, which was adopted at a conference in Moscow in March 2009 (including joint training, exercises and the creation of a regional anti-narcotics centre).

In 2011, Russia supported the idea of granting observer status for Afghanistan at the SCO, and declared its support for a greater role for the SCO in Afghani-

stan. This was probably connected with plans to reduce the Western military presence in Afghanistan and the US's attempts at constructively engaging the organisation (and especially China) in resolving the Afghan problem.

## **2. The problem of Afghanistan's new regional format (Pakistan, Tajikistan)**

In June 2009, Russia created a new format for dialogue in the region: the Russia-Afghanistan-Pakistan 'troika' (the presidents of Russia (Dmitri Medvedev), Afghanistan (Hamid Karzai) and Pakistan (Asif Ali Zardari) first met together on 15 June 2009 at the first trilateral meeting of the SCO summit in Yekaterinburg). Next, a meeting of foreign ministers was held in this format on 26 June 2009 in Trieste, where they decided to investigate the possibility of cooperating in border protection, counter-terrorism information exchange, counter-terrorism and anti-narcotics training, and the promotion of regional trade<sup>63</sup>.

This move seemed on one hand to have been dictated by the recognition (which the West had already made) of the close connection between the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and also probably to Russia's new readiness to reach out to the Pashtun communities associated with Pakistan, including the 'moderate Taliban'. In this way, Russia is apparently preparing for possible future political changes in Afghanistan.

On 18 August 2010 in Sochi, the presidents of Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan met together, with the intention of launching a new Russian-created four-party dialogue (it was also announced that there would be regular meetings between these countries' economic and foreign ministers). The main topic was the security risks associated with the situation in Afghanistan and the fight against illicit drug trafficking. However, they also discussed economic projects in the region, including Afghanistan (especially the modernisation of the Salang

<sup>63</sup> Joint statement by the foreign ministers of Russia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Trieste, 26 June 2009, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru).

tunnel and the construction of hydroelectric plants)<sup>64</sup>. The meeting showed that Russia has perceived the marked increase in the neighbouring countries' importance and influence on the situation in Afghanistan, and wants to seek support for promoting its own economic interests, including developing power generation in Afghanistan and its vicinity. The second summit in this format took place in Dushanbe on 2 September 2011.

On 22 September 2010, on the occasion of the UN General Assembly in New York, the first meeting of the foreign ministers of this new 'quartet' was held, during which they discussed the situation in the region, the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, and how to develop economic cooperation.

<sup>64</sup> <http://news.kremlin.ru/news/8672>



## **V. Russia on the future of the Afghan problem**

### **1. Russia's official position on Afghanistan**

If we were to briefly summarise Russia's current official position on the Afghan problem, it would sound like this:

It is in Russia's interest that Afghanistan be independent, integral and neutral, living in peace with its neighbours, and not a source of threats to the international environment. Russia is concerned about the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. This is why it supports the efforts of the Afghan government and international forces, whose continued presence in Afghanistan is necessary in the current situation. However, their results have been insufficient. It is thus necessary to implement a comprehensive strategy to activate the reconstruction assistance and strengthen Afghanistan's power structures; to give the Afghan government more influence in shaping security policy; to fight hard against drug production and trafficking; and to make efforts to accelerate the country's economic reconstruction. These activities should be undertaken with the broad participation of interested international actors, without discrimination against anyone. The role of Afghanistan's neighbours and international organisations, in particular the SCO and CSTO, in resolving the Afghan problem should be enhanced. Rank and file members of the Taliban should be encouraged to join the reconciliation process, on condition that they acknowledge the legal *status quo*; but there can be no question of talks with the most extreme of the Taliban's leaders. The central role in resolving the problem should be played by the UN and the people of Afghanistan.

### **2. Russia on the prospect of Western forces withdrawing from Afghanistan**

Since 2009, it has been ever more apparent that the key participants in the Afghan operation wish to begin the process of withdrawing their forces from Afghanistan. At that time, the framework of a new American strategy was presented, which depended on an initial increase of their own contingent and of other contingents in Afghanistan; undertaking offensive operations against

armed groups in Afghanistan; and then beginning the process of withdrawing Western forces, linked to the increasing responsibility of the Afghan army and security forces for their state's security. In accordance with US President Barack Obama's declaration in December 2009, and the initial plan announced in June 2011, the withdrawal process began in July 2011. This is to proceed until about the year 2014, when full responsibility for security is to be transferred to the Kabul government, although this does not assume the total removal of the US and Western military presence in Afghanistan. At the same time, intensive US-Afghan negotiations on a strategic partnership agreement have been ongoing; according to media leaks, these are aimed at maintaining some form of US military presence in Afghanistan<sup>65</sup>.

This has opened up the prospect of different scenarios of how the situation would develop. These include the possibility that the Taliban will actually return to power in Afghanistan, if not as a result of military success, then as part of the so-called process of national reconciliation (also, since the Kabul conference in July 2010, called the 'Kabul process'), which is being carried out with increasing intensity by the Karzai government, and is officially supported by the leading states in the coalition. Another implied possibility is the effective disintegration of the country into a Taliban-dominated south and a northern Afghanistan fighting against them.

On the other hand, the prospect of strengthening the US military presence in Afghanistan, and/or the partial relocation of US forces to certain Central Asian states neighbouring Afghanistan, is also taking shape. According to some Russian experts, the US could be expected to leave thirty to fifty thousand American soldiers at bases in Afghanistan, and create new US bases and transit centres, particularly in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (the latter would play an important role in the land transit of US troops withdrawn from Afghanistan)<sup>66</sup>.

<sup>65</sup> Statements by politicians and US officials on this issue were unclear. The most reliable note was sounded by the outgoing US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, who suggested that under a future agreement, formally Afghan military bases could be used by US troops. See Gates' statement for the Tolo agency: Afghanistan.ru, 7 June 2011.

<sup>66</sup> See V. Dubovitski, 'Amerikanskaya sud'ba Afganistana ot A do Ya', Afghanistan.ru, 25 March 2011: <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/19795.html>; A. Serenko, 'Posle Afganistana: Uroki vyvoda vojsk', Afghanistan.ru, 15 February 2011: <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/19520.html>; O. Nessar, 'Afganistan

The official representatives of the Russian Federation have reacted to this situation in two ways. Firstly, they have expressed concern about the prospect of Western forces withdrawing from Afghanistan, particularly in too hasty a manner. Russia's ambassador to NATO Dmitri Rogozin warned against this in a dramatic tone (as did Boris Gromov, the commander of the former 40<sup>th</sup> Soviet Army in Afghanistan, and now Governor of the Moscow region, in an article published on 11 January 2010 in the *New York Times*)<sup>67</sup>. The serious danger if Western forces withdraw was also mentioned in February 2011 by Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov, in a speech at a conference on security policy in Munich<sup>68</sup>. Also, the president's special representative for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov said in May 2011 that "before talking about leaving Afghanistan, there is a need to resolve the Afghan problem."<sup>69</sup> President Medvedev himself expressed this idea in a more understated way at a meeting with President Karzai in Moscow in January 2011<sup>70</sup>. The Afghan forces' ill-preparedness to take responsibility for security over the next three years has also been mentioned by Russia's ambassador in Kabul, Andrei Avetisian<sup>71</sup>.

v lovushke neopredelonnosti, Rossiya v globalnoy politike', No. 2, Global Affairs March-April 2011: <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Afganistan-v-lovushke-neopredelennosti-15185>

<sup>67</sup> The authors wrote: "It is imperative for all three [NATO, Western security and the future of Central Asia] for NATO to honour its commitments to Afghanistan", "Officials in Brussels and Washington who are considering a quick exit strategy from Afghanistan for the ISAF mission are involved in devising a suicidal plan. Withdrawal without victory may lead to the political collapse of the Western security structures", "The withdrawal will give a powerful impetus to Islamic militants, destabilise the Central Asian republics and launch waves of refugees, including many thousands who will head for Europe and Russia", "We are deeply dissatisfied with the sentiment of surrender at NATO headquarters, whether under the guise of 'humanitarian pacifism' or pragmatism", "We urge NATO forces to remain in the country, until conditions are right for the establishment of stable local government, which can resist the forces of radical forces, and can control the country." At the same time, they stated that Russia and the Central Asian countries were preparing a CSTO Rapid Reaction Force "in the event of NATO's failure in Afghanistan." B. Gromov, D. Rogozin, 'Russian advice on Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 11 January 2010; [www.nytimes.com/2010/01/12/opinion/12iht-edrogozin.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/12/opinion/12iht-edrogozin.html)

<sup>68</sup> Deputy Prime Minister Ivanov stated that "the departure from here [Afghanistan] of peacekeeping forces, including NATO troops, may pose a military threat to us [Russia]", 'Interfax-AWN, 7 February 2011.

<sup>69</sup> 'Nuzhno idti v Afganistan...', *op.cit.*

<sup>70</sup> At a joint press conference, President Medvedev stated: "And as for the future, I would like all the international presence in Afghanistan, all the foreign military contingents, to complete their part of commitments to support peace and security in Afghanistan, and to leave Afghanistan in glory and respect." 'Press-konferentsiya po itogam rossijsko-afganskikh peregovorov', Moscow 21 January 2011, [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru)

<sup>71</sup> Reuters, 22 June 2011.

On the other hand, media leaks about the possible establishment of permanent US military bases in Afghanistan have provoked critical reactions in Moscow. Zamir Kabulov ironically pointed out that conditions on site may prevent such plans, and warned that “leaving US military bases behind on the basis of long-term contracts may significantly worsen the regional situation, and develop into a source of tension<sup>72</sup>.” This was a clear warning shot at Washington, like the earlier criticism from the Russian Foreign Ministry in February 2011<sup>73</sup>.

Moreover, Russia has clearly demanded guarantees from the US that there will be no expansion of the American and NATO military presence in Central Asia. This topic was one of the most important points discussed during the Russian defence minister Anatoly Serdiukov’s visit to the US in September 2010<sup>74</sup>.

When analysing Russia’s attitude in this new situation, we can discern the clear directions of its activity. In particular, Moscow has taken the following steps:

- it has sought to influence the development of the internal situation in Afghanistan, including by strengthening collaboration with the Karzai government and establishing contacts with the Taliban;

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>73</sup> Doubt was expressed as to whether this would be consistent with the declarations that Western forces would withdraw by 2014; with the process of national reconciliation in Afghanistan; with the provisions of the Russian-American presidents’ declaration in June 2010 in support of for the neutrality of Afghanistan, and concern was expressed about the reaction from the states neighbouring Afghanistan. ‘Kommentariy Departamenta informatsii i pechati MID Rossii otnositelno soobshcheniy SMI o namerenii SShA razmestit’ vojennyye bazy na territorii Afghanistana’, 18 February 2011: [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/87CA594848E07BD8C325783B00500B2D](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/87CA594848E07BD8C325783B00500B2D). On the other hand, the Russian ambassador to NATO Dmitri Rogozin suggested that the US had found a pretext for leaving a contingent of its troops in Afghanistan. Cf. Rosbalt, 6 July 2011; <http://www.rosbalt.ru/moscow/2011/07/06/866733.html>

<sup>74</sup> Minister Sierdiukov was then supposed to obtain assurances that the withdrawal of Western forces in Afghanistan would not involve an increase in the Western military presence in Central Asia. This meant not creating new bases in Kyrgyzstan and the withdrawal of the US forces which were already there. Cf. Praym-TASS, 17 September 2010; <http://www.prime-tass.ru/news/0/%7B3C73F304-51B4-4ECE-AEB3-8F49F363C880%7D.uif>. In December 2008, The Chief of General Staff of the Russian Federation’s Armed Forces, General Nikolai Makarov, expressed concern about US plans to establish bases in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Cf. Regnum, 16 December 2008, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1099984.html>

- it has activated cooperation with the US and NATO, expanding its offer of support for Afghanistan and the coalition forces (including the question of return transit);
- it has sought to prevent any shifting the burden of Western, especially American military presence from Afghanistan into Central Asia and becoming a permanent fixture there;
- it has activated contacts with Afghanistan's neighbours (particularly Pakistan and Tajikistan), leading a dialogue on the situation in that country;
- it has intensified attempts to create instruments for the increase of its security presence in Central Asia

### 3. Scenarios for Russia's future policy

Despite the growing involvement of Western military forces, the security situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating. The Taliban's forces, who are drawing on their resources and backup on the Pakistani-Afghan border, are striking more and stronger blows at the government forces, still rather weak, and the international forces, still numerically insufficient. Meanwhile, the societies of democratic Western countries cannot continue to tolerate such a high level of losses, and have been exerting increasing pressure on their governments to withdraw from Afghanistan as quickly as possible (although in the case of the US government, this would not necessarily mean complete withdrawal). Both the Afghan government and the majority of the coalition partners are inclined to hold talks with the Taliban, which may in the near future lead to a power-sharing scenario with them (and, in fact, to grant them power under certain conditions). This, in turn, may (but need not) lead the way to resistance in the northern part of the country, which is dominated by non-Pashtun nationalities. If this move proves effective, it could lead to the country being divided into two zones separated by the Hindu Kush mountain range.

For Russia, this basically means a simple choice between two strategies: taking action aimed at maximally strengthening the anti-Taliban front, both inside

and outside Afghanistan; or preparation for a gradual, peaceful transfer of power to the Taliban, and establishing pragmatic relations with them.

### 3.1. Russia and the ongoing fight against the Taliban

On one hand, Russia could make an effort to restore the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, and to some extent, to work for a return to the *status quo ante* of the mid-1990s. With Russian political, financial and military support (although the direct involvement of the Russian military is unlikely) a kind of buffer would be created in northern Afghanistan against the Taliban-controlled south of the country.

At the same time, Russia would reactivate its previous anti-Taliban international alliance, involving India, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as the United States and leading Western countries, which together with Russia could make an attempt to build a kind of *cordon sanitaire* around Afghanistan, both as an obstacle to the export of Islamic radicalism to Central Asia and beyond, and to the trafficking of illegal drugs.

One reason why such a scenario could work is the danger that the Taliban's total control of Afghanistan would pose to Russia. It is likely that the Taliban would attempt to export radical Islam to Central Asia; if successful, this would also strike at Russia's interests in the region (the Russian political and military presence could be seen as culturally and ideologically alien there). They could also support Islamic radicalism in the Russian North Caucasus, as happened in the 1990s. This would also certainly contribute to an increase in narcotics exports, which would cause Russia further harm. Moreover, cooperation in combating the Taliban would enhance Russia's military presence in at least some regions in Central Asia, and lead to their bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Russia. On the other hand, Russia would become an important partner for the US and NATO in deterring and locating the Taliban, which could bring additional benefits to Moscow's political and economic sphere. If a stable buffer zone was created in the north of Afghanistan, resulting in its *de facto* partition, Russia also could attempt to exploit this situation for its own economic interests (for example, in the key deposits of raw materials located in northern Afghanistan, which Moscow is interested in).

Against this scenario is the fact that Russian influence with the former representatives of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan has decreased in recent years, its place now taken by other actors. It is not certain that Russia would be the major patron of the anti-Taliban opposition; this task could successfully be taken over by the US and NATO (which according to some Russian experts, is already happening). This would lead to the dangerous perception, from Moscow's perspective, that it was being replaced as the main actor and sponsor of military co-operation with the Central Asian states in the security sphere, as 'back-up for the front'. That in turn could lead to the implementation of a 'black scenario' for Russia: the transfer of the Western military presence's main focal point from Afghanistan to Central Asia, a presence which could grow and become permanent.

### **3.2. A *modus vivendi* between Russia and the Taliban**

Russia could support Karzai's policy of 'national reconciliation' more strongly, and try for a more direct involvement in its implementation. In particular, Russia could, by direct informal contacts with the Taliban, try to become the actual patron of some of the conservative Pashtuns. It could also strengthen its cooperation with Pakistan, including with its secret services, in an attempt to win greater influence over the internal situation in Afghanistan. Thus, Russia would support the continued unity of Afghanistan as the price of this 'Talibanisation'<sup>75</sup>.

This scenario is made more likely by the fact that the Karzai government, with the support of at least part of the country and some Western elites, has in fact already engaged in dialogue with the Taliban as part of the policy of 'national reconciliation'. The US and other Western states are actually not attempting to win the 'war on the Taliban,' but rather to create immediately the conditions to withdraw the bulk of their forces from Afghanistan (by 2014). In this situation, Russia's search for a *modus vivendi* with the Taliban would signify that it accepted the logic of this already ongoing process, and a kind of 'retreat forwards'. Furthermore, if they successfully completed (or at least significantly

<sup>75</sup> Russian expert and politician Semyon Bagdasarov, a member of the International Committee of the State Duma, is one of those who favours such a scenario.

reduced) the armed Afghan conflict through political means, the reason for a substantial Western military presence – not only in Afghanistan, but also (which is key for Russia) in Central Asia – would disappear. The ‘Talibanisation’ of Afghanistan, combined with the withdrawal of Western forces from that country, would certainly raise serious concern from the countries of Central Asia, which would now be more exposed to Islamic radicalism and narcotics from Afghanistan. This could be a strong argument for strengthening their military cooperation in the security sphere with Russia, which would create a counterweight not only to Western influence, but also to China’s rapidly growing influence in the region.

Against this scenario speaks the risk of the export from Afghanistan to Central Asia, and perhaps also to Russia itself, of destabilisation caused by Islamic extremism, as described earlier. Above all, there is uncertainty as to the attitude of the United States and Central Asian states to any potential ‘Talibanisation’ of Afghanistan. Just as was (temporarily) the case in the 1990s, they may see some advantages to a stabilised situation, and some of them might even establish their own pragmatic relationships with the new Afghan authorities. This could create a new geopolitical situation in the region, and open up the possibility of implementing major infrastructure projects (in energy and transport), connecting Central and South Asia, which would not necessarily be compatible with the interests of the Russian Federation. In turn, if the US and Central Asian states’ attitude towards the Taliban in Afghanistan remained more hostile, there would be a risk (from Russia’s standpoint) that the creation of a cordon sanitaire around Afghanistan would be associated with increased, rather than reduced US cooperation in the security sphere, as well as a greater US military presence in Central Asia. This could in turn encourage China to strengthen its security cooperation with the Central Asian countries to counterbalance the presence of the West, a move which would be potentially dangerous in Moscow’s eyes.



## Conclusion

The above considerations indicate that Russia is facing a difficult choice regarding its further strategy towards the Afghan problem. The optimal scenario for Russia – the significant strengthening of the Afghan security forces and the Karzai government, which would guarantee the possibility of the Western forces' imminent withdrawal from Afghanistan and Central Asia without leading to deepening instability – seems unlikely. It is not entirely clear which of the other options is currently favoured by the Russian government. It seems that Moscow has no coherent or consistent strategy. It is likely that the Russian ruling elite, like expert circles<sup>76</sup>, is divided on this issue. Probably we are dealing here, on one hand, with supporters of President Karzai or the former Northern Alliance, or supporters of a *modus vivendi* with the Taliban; on the other hand, there are those who favour stronger support for the international forces and cooperation with the West, or the supporters of 'armed neutrality' and displacing the West from Afghanistan and Central Asia. In practice, the Russian authorities now seem to be simultaneously implementing elements of all the strategies outlined above, thus trying to leave themselves the widest possible room for manoeuvre.

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<sup>76</sup> See, e.g. D. Trenin, A. Malashenko, 'Afganistan. Vzglad iz severa', Moscow Carnegie Centre, Moscow 2010; Y. Krupnov et al., 'Put' k miru i soglasiyu v Afganistane opredeliayetsa pozitsyjej, kotoruju zaymiot Rossiya', Moscow 2008; A. Umnov, 'Rossiya yedinom zainteresovana v Afganistanie', Afghanistan.ru, 23 August 2007; V. Yevskiyev, 'Afganistan kak obshchaya rossiysko-amerikanskaya problema', RIA Novosti 29 June 2009; Bagdasarov's interview for RIA Novosti, 30 June 2008; <http://viperson.ru/wind.php?ID=473822&soch=1>; Omar Nessar, 'Afganistan v lowushkie ...', *op.cit.*



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