Russia’s Geopolitics in Afghanistan and Central Asia

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Afghanistan has the enduring curse of being at the perpetual epicenter of the interplay of perfidious games of major global and regional players. It has been caught up in a war forced on it by great power competition for nearly forty years, and over the past half a decade, has returned to the centre of the strategic chessboard. Global and regional players have been destabilizing Afghanistan to further their own divergent interests and to counter their opponents. The current situation in Afghanistan reflects the detrimental impact of global involvements in the region, coupled with internal strife.

Afghanistan, through all these years of push and pull, has become a victim of its own geostrategic centrality, making it a perfect ‘playground’ for conflicting interests, ambitions and political ideologies. The change in the contours of global power relations has not diminished its miseries. In a bi-polar world, under the shadow of the Cold War, the US and the Soviets fought a ‘hot war’ in Afghanistan. When the USSR

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disintegrated, and the country appeared to be setting itself free from the clutches of the Russian and American influence, the Pakistanis came in hot pursuit to consolidate the enormous influence they had usurped during the US war on communism. Pakistan’s purported strategic interest was to gain ‘depth’ in the region in order to counter a rising India. The calculation, based on mere apprehension that India might use Afghanistan as a springboard to launch anti-Pakistan activities, led to sinister designs that led to the formation and rise of the Taliban. The use of militancy by Pakistan as a tool of foreign policy to achieve its interests not only expanded in scale, it also deepened the ethnic fissures between Pashtun and non-Pashtun within Afghan society. Pakistan’s policies in Afghanistan have had catastrophic regional and international consequences.

One of the disastrous consequences was the 9/11 attacks in the US, which changed the dynamics of the conflict in Asia. The US, which had barely shown any interest in Afghanistan after the early 1990s, returned with all its military might. Pakistan with its own design, suddenly became a ‘benign partner’ in the region, narrowly escaping the threat of being bombed back into the Stone Age.\(^1\) It would be imprudent to suggest that the US presence has not worsened the situation since 2001. The policies adopted by the US-led international community lacked a proper understanding of regional dynamics, as well as the role of Pakistan as a powerful destabilizing entity and a master of the game of running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. Rory Stewart, a member of the British Parliamentarian aptly summarized the reasons for the failure in Afghanistan:

The truth is that the West always lacked the knowledge, power, or legitimacy to fundamentally transform

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Afghanistan. But policymakers were too afraid, too hypnotized by fashionable theories, too isolated from Afghan reality, and too laden with guilt to notice that the more ambitious Afghanistan mission was impossible and unnecessary.2

Over the past few years, the volatility has increased, escalating violence and instability in the region, creating a power vacuum and luring other players to come to Afghanistan in order to either further or protect their divergent interests.

The current vacuum in Afghanistan provides ample space for regional players like India, Iran, China and Russia to intervene in Afghan affairs, slowly increasing their stakes in the region. Russia and China have emerged as a powerful bloc in formulating regional policies, with widening implications for Afghanistan. The US, on the other hand, is stuck with its flailing policy, with growing concerns among its allies on the future of Afghanistan. The sense of commitment and responsibility towards Afghanistan has been progressively and severely eroded among these allies. The adversarial relationship between the Russian and the United States manifesting itself on the ground in Afghanistan may well transform this hapless nation once again into a theatre of Russian-American conflict – a pawn in major power rivalry. With China, along with the Pakistan, aligning itself on the Russian side, new equations are emerging in the conflict. Indeed, while not explicitly formalized, the new relations between China and Russia raise the spectre of an unprecedented rivalry with the US. Despite its tragic history through the Cold War, Afghanistan has never witnessed such powerful alignments working simultaneously against each other in the past.

It is not just these complex interests and calculations of the global players that contribute to the violence and instability of Afghanistan. The internal rivalries at the ethnic and national level create ample spaces for the international community to intervene on behalf of one faction or the other. It was General Mohammed Daud’s turning to the Soviet Union for economic and military assistance in early 1950s that provoked the great power rivalries that played out on Afghani soil thereafter, as he sought to play off Western forces against the Soviet Union. The Soviet invasion of December 1979 brought in a direct confrontation of unprecedented proportions, far beyond the Cold War competition South Asia had witnessed before this. The culmination of series of events, backed and supported by regional forces, marked the beginning of Afghanistan’s violent disintegration, a process it is still trying to pull itself out of.

Even after the Soviet withdrawal, the Moscow-backed Najibullah Government tried to keep the Soviet interest alive in Afghanistan, despite the fact that it was unable to extract substantial support from the Government in Moscow. The end of Najibullah government came when he was forced to step down as a president by the rebels within its own party and military, with the help of the mujahedeen.

The mujahideen, a patchwork army of Islamist guerrillas and warlords backed by US and Pakistani intelligence agencies, fought among themselves for supremacy throughout the early 1990s. A handicapped and dysfunctional government under the leadership of the Buhrauddin Rabbani administered chaos, before the violent tide of the Pakistan sponsored Taliban swept across the region. The Taliban rampage, however, stalled in Northern Afghanistan, with anti-Taliban Tajik and Uzbek forces upsetting their ambitions.

Over the last five decades, events suggest that the power rivalry between the ethnic groups in Afghanistan have
enormously compounded problems, creating the spaces for international intervention. Ethnic fissures among the Afghans were on full display when the Tajiks and Hazaras, later joined by the Uzbeks, fought against the Pashtun majoritarian Taliban. The rise of the radical Taliban led to an incessant bloodbath in Afghanistan with global repercussions, including the 9/11 attacks in the US, which changed the entire dynamics of the region after the US invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001.

The fall of the Taliban and the setting up of the democratic government since then has hardly changed the fate of the civilians who have long been caught in the crossfire. The failure of US-led international forces to contain extremist violence has left the region insecure and unstable. Political fissures and the uncertainty over the role and presence of the US-led coalition has resulted in the emergence of power blocs with competing, often conflicting, interests. The consequences go well beyond Afghanistan, and several countries, particularly the Central Asian republics, are enormously concerned about the impact of growing instability in Afghanistan on their own populations and boundaries. Moreover, after a quarter-century hiatus, Russia and the United States are again on the verge of a new power-play in the region, with potentially catastrophic consequences. How Afghanistan will evolve from this point onwards will not only depend on how the US-led coalition acts, but also on how a resurgent Russia, backed new partners, will react.

THE COLD WAR PERIOD: SOVIET IN COMMAND OF THE REGION

The Soviet Union’s military intervention in Afghanistan began on December 25, 1979, with the sole aim of defeating the anti-communist insurgency and consolidating a pro-Soviet
Government in Afghanistan. The Saur Revolution (April 1978), which helped the Soviets overthrow the Afghan President Mohammed Daoud Khan, could be considered a prelude to the Soviet invasion. The subsequent period was marked with high levels of volatility that forced Moscow to engineer frequent regime changes in Kabul. Despite repeated attempts at subduing the Afghans at both the military and political level, the Soviets were unable to contain the violent insurgency against its puppet regimes. Their nearly 10-year long military and political adventure in Afghanistan was a catastrophe at the ideological and strategic level, both for the Soviets and the Afghans, and achieved none of its intended objectives. It is, however, imperative to recognize what Soviet concerns and interests in the region were, which provoked its military adventurism, and the degree to which these have survived into the current scenario. This requires an examination of the Soviet policy towards Central and South Asia, its immediate neighbours, and the broader Third World.

The foremost factor was the kind of political ideology Soviet Union sought in order to create a peaceful world order. It saw itself grappling with an ideological struggle against the West, with Communism pitched against anti-people imperialism. Protecting and promulgating the ideology in newly independent countries of the Third World was seen as necessary in order to support and promote Communism. The belief was that, in the long haul, ex-colonial countries would gravitate to ‘Socialism.’ A new sense of optimism emerged in the USSR, after initial setbacks to the Khrushchevian

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model. The United States was seen as a declining power, the correlation of forces as moving decisively in favour of ‘socialism’, and the Third World as entering a new era of revolutionary transformation. It was believed necessary to add more and more countries to the Socialist bloc, drawing them into the Soviet sphere of influence. Military power was one of the tools employed, along with political and economic intervention in the Third World. Principally, any movement against the Soviet-backed Governments in the ‘satellite states’ was considered a movement against the policy and ideology of the Soviets. Afghanistan was a test case for this strategy.

Afghanistan was also an immediate neighbour and was located at a strategic crossroads – sandwiched between Iran and Pakistan, two CENTO (Central Treaty Organisation) members of the Baghdad Pact, and the only non-aligned country south of the Soviet Union. Afghanistan acted as the only barrier between the US ally Pakistan and the highly diversified industrial complex in Soviet Central Asia. The Soviets wanted to protect Afghanistan against the growing US influence through its ally, Pakistan, which had joined the Western Bloc in order to counter India.

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4 Khrushchev model can be defined as a policy approach for newly independent countries, Third World countries for a rapid transition toward socialism, toward Soviet-type societies and close association with the Soviet international bloc. Fritz W. Ermarth, Director of National Security Programs at the Nixon Center states that process was guided by the example of Soviet national development, protected from the depredations of imperialism by the deterrent shield of Soviet strategic power, and accelerated by a modicum of Soviet economic and military aid.


Similarly, volumes of literature highlight the importance of the oil-rich Persian Gulf in the overall Soviets strategic decision to attack Afghanistan. The breach of the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979 led to an increased American presence in South West Asia, with a particular buildup of naval units in the Persian Gulf. This fed into the Soviet narrative that the US sought to use the Persian region and Iran to encircle it. The relatively weak response of the US Government to the situation in Iran gave the impression that its intervention in Afghanistan might go relatively unchallenged. It is still unclear how far the Soviets were willing to drive through towards the Arabian Sea, dividing the CENTO allies Pakistan and Iran. However, this fear played an important role in defining the western response.

Additionally, there were apprehensions among Soviet leaders of Muslim radicalization in the Central Asian states. The rebellion against the Soviet-supported Government at Kabul and the prospect of the collapse of communism Afghanistan, coupled with the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, constituted a serious ideational and possibly geopolitical threat to the Soviet Union. The Soviets feared that the radicalization in Afghanistan might reach its boundaries, with an explosion of religiously-motivated violent extremism across Central Asia, to the detrimental of the highly militarized Central Asian

security complex.\textsuperscript{10} The rise of Islam was also against the stated ideology of Communism, which adhered firmly to atheism. Throughout their history, the Soviets feared the radicalization of their own Muslim population through the Islamic countries bordering it. The change of language and shift from Latin to Cyrillic had similar political and ideological underpinnings, as it was intended to distance the Soviet Muslims from the West and Turkey (the latter had adopted the Latin script), and to enhance the learning of Russian.\textsuperscript{11} The move was aimed at cutting the Muslim dominated regions of the USSR off from any kind of provocative Islamic literature.

It was, consequently, a culmination of series of considerations and potential challenges to their power that prompted the Soviets to invade Afghanistan.

\textbf{After the Cold War: Rise of the Mujahideen}

The nearly decade-long war in Afghanistan and the face-saving withdrawal of Soviet troops had a disastrous impact on the Soviet Union. The war and the subsequent withdrawal from what was initially considered by the Soviets to be a minor conflict with containable and minimal implications, turned out


to be one of the major causes of the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet power. The economic, military and diplomatic costs of the Afghan war widened the political fissure between the leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and, much worse, the defeat of the national Red Army had a huge impact on the population. The Army till that point had been seen as the torchbearer of communism. Apart from other systemic institution failures, the Afghan war played an important role in collapse of the Soviet’s global stronghold in the bipolar world order, leaving the US as the only hegemonic power. The Afghan misadventure was the final folly of the Brezhnev era, Gorbachev’s “bloody wound”, highlighting the system’s bankruptcy and undoubtedly speeding up the collapse of the Soviet Union.  

The Soviet collapse decisively impacted on Russia’s clout and capacity to manage its periphery and satellite states. Afghanistan was no exception. The fall of the Soviet Union handicapped the Najibullah Government in Afghanistan, which continued to receive extensive economic and political support from Moscow even after the withdrawal of the Soviet Army. Though the US sustained only symbolic interest in the region after the withdrawal of the Soviets, Pakistan had maneuvered itself to the helm. The shrinking resources from Russia soon resulted in loss of Najibullah’s control, compounded further by the rising power of rival Mujahideen warlords, all of which soon precipitated into a full blown civil war, leading to the overthrow of the Najibullah Government.

The fall of the Najibullah Government drew the curtain on all kinds of official influence Russia had in Afghanistan. The successor Burhanuddin Rabbani Government had little

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opportunity of meaningful engagement with a fading Russian power. Pakistan’s increasing influence on the Rabbani Government in the initial years, and equally on the opposing mujahideen factions, curtailed any kind of external influence in Afghanistan.

This was also the period when post-Soviet Russia was battling a nearly collapsed economy, with major industries facing imminent closure and a former single all-union power, transport and communications system on the verge of collapse. Between 1991 and 1998, Russia lost nearly 30 per cent of its real Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and suffered numerous bouts of inflation that decimated private savings. Russians also saw their disposable incomes decline rapidly and there was a massive flight of capital from the country, with close to $150 billion flowing out between 1992 and 1999.\(^\text{13}\)

Russia’s inability to maintain its economic assistance to the newly independent Central Asian countries, which were also facing economic turmoil, limited its capacities to influence Afghanistan as well. Russia considered the Central Asian republics a natural sphere of influence, and sought to maintain some sway there, but, for reasons both of incapacity and unwillingness, progressively abandoned its ambitions beyond this region. The loss of its dominant position in Central Asia and its own internal crises kept Russia at bay in Afghanistan.

During the second half of the 1990s, the rise of radical Islamist Taliban and the formation of the Northern Alliance under the leadership Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masood pitched the Russians against the Taliban, in favour of the Northern

Alliance. Russian engagement with the Northern Alliance was primarily limited to military and technical support.\textsuperscript{14} India, Iran and Russia joined hands against the Taliban, a group they considered to be a destructive regional force and a brainchild of Pakistani military-intelligence.

Russian foreign policy remained largely dormant for many years under Boris Yelstin, and gained momentum only under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. Nevertheless, the country was able to regain some of its lost prominence by the late 1990s, particularly under the guidance of Yevgeny Primakov who served as Foreign Minister between 1996 and 1998, and then as Prime Minister, till May 1999. This was a period in which Russia recovered some level of its economic and military heft, despite an economic crisis in 1998, giving it the wherewithal to restructure its foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian foreign policy at this stage was directed towards building the country’s image and consolidating relations within the region under what came to be known as the ‘Primakov Doctrine’\textsuperscript{15} The core of the doctrine was built on the idea of recovering Russia’s international status and its role as a centre of influence over the former Soviet states\textsuperscript{16} and to build a Eurasian counterbalance to the American-led Atlantic


\textsuperscript{15} Primakov Doctrine can be defined as an outline of the conceptual foundation for Russian dominance in the post-Soviet area. Its primary aim was to challenge the unilateral dominance of the US in the global politics by establishing a multipolar world. Doctrine aimed at freeing Russia from its subservient foreign policy guided by the US. According to Ariel Cohen, Analyst at Heritage Foundation, “the Primakov doctrine is designed primarily to dilute America’s strength and influence while increasing Russia’s influence and position in the Middle East and Eurasia.”

Alliance by forging closer ties between Russia, China and Iran, as well as, possibly, India and France. Russia did gain some regional clout during this period, but it still lacked the components of hard power to back a comprehensive foreign policy direction.

It was under Putin that Russia began to reassert itself on the global platform. In the initial years, Putin concentrated more on the Eurasian region, as a net regional security provider. After 2000, Russia gradually begun to eschew the old Soviet approach of emphasizing the maintenance and deployment of its military power to ensure its geopolitical position and moved, instead, in the direction of first building up and then starting utilizing its economic resources to encourage neighbouring states to associate more closely with its regional policies. Moscow’s policy objectives sought, first, to bring back the Central Asian republics to its strategic ambit. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, these countries had adopted a geopolitical orientation in favour of the West, particularly towards Russian arch-rival, the US. To achieve this objective, Russia sought to integrate the


18 Hans Morgenthau offers description of the state power in terms of Hard Power. He emphasizes the use of coercive force in enumerating political power. Accordingly he suggests, “In international politics in particular, armed strength as a threat or a potentiality is the most important material factor making for the political power of a nation.” Similarly, Scholar Joseph Nye identifies hard power as “the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will.”


Central Asian countries into a comprehensive and cooperative economic and trading system. In the initial period of the Putin era, Russia invested much of its energy and resources in these former Soviet states. Second, Russia was keenly aware, from past experience, that the stability of Afghanistan was key to stability in the Central Asian states. Significantly, as far as its strategic interests were concerned, unlike the US, for Russia the road to Kabul did not go through Rawalpindi. It is the Central Asian countries that played the decisive role in maintaining Moscow’s ties with Afghanistan. Central Asia was, thus, both means and end for Russia.

9/11: The Return of the US

History has the tendency to repeat itself in bizarre ways. On October 22, 2001, during a meeting with the Tajik President Emomali Rahmon and Burhanuddin Rabbani, Russian President Putin observed, “We presume that the position of the legitimate, internationally recognized government of the Islamic state of Afghanistan – that the Taliban movement should not be represented in the future government – is well grounded.” 21 This was the time when US Secretary of State Collin Powell stressed the role of moderate elements of the Taliban in a postwar Afghan government.22 These positions are in complete contrast with their current stands on the Taliban issue.

Despite President Putin’s declaration of “outright support” for the United States in Afghanistan and Moscow’s backing of

the Northern Alliance, along with the international forces, with a heavy supply of weapons, training and logistical support, there was an apparent sense of apprehension on the future US role in Afghanistan. This concern was equally shared by Iran and China. Russia and the US also disagreed on what form any post-Taliban government should take. Washington and its closest ally in the region, Pakistan, wanted “moderate” Taliban leaders to be included in the government, while Russia was unwilling to accommodate any fraction of the Taliban in the new Government. This difference was the first seed of future discord between the Russians and the Americans in post 9/11 Afghanistan.

The subsequent decade saw a lull in Russia’s foreign policy towards Afghanistan, even as its presence and influence saw significant ups and downs in the Central Asian region. However, insurgency and instability in Afghanistan remained a major concern for Moscow, particularly with regard to the rising flow of opium and derivative products into Russia.

**Russia’s Current Policy and Concerns in Afghanistan**

Russia has always seen Afghanistan through the prism of Central Asia, and its interests in the region are proximately linked with Central Asian energy development, with a new focus on gas as markets expand in Europe and Asia. From Russia’s foreign policy perspectives, the politico-geographic conception of the region has always considered Afghanistan and Central Asia as a single, shared geostrategic sphere. At

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a strategic level, this gives Russia an added advantage in countering US influence on the Central Asian countries, and an extended ground for its action or reaction in Afghanistan. The policy has hardly seen any drastic shift since the cold war era.

The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation reflects a comprehensive understanding of Putin’s initiatives in Central Asia and Afghanistan. The fundamental foreign policy objectives or general principles according to the Concept include ‘to create favourable external conditions for the steady development of Russia’, and ‘to form a good-neighbourly belt along the perimeter of Russia’s borders, and to promote the elimination of existing and prevent the emergence of potential hotbeds of tension and conflicts in regions adjacent to the Russian Federation’.25 In particular, the Russian Federation Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 and 2016 discuss an array of interests: vital geopolitical positions, economic and trade opportunities, lasting Russian cultural impact, presence of Russian-speaking communities, etc., on risks and challenges. The FP Concept notes that “Russia will build up cooperation with the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Member States in ensuring mutual security, including joint efforts to combat drug trafficking, transnational crime, and illegal migration. Priorities here are the neutralisation of specified threats coming from the territory of Afghanistan and the prevention of destabilisation of the situation in Central Asia.”26

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Similarly, 2016 papers talks about overcoming challenges and threats faced by the post-Soviet space amid growing pressure from various global and regional players.  

**RUSSIA’S THREE MAJOR CONCERNS**

Retaining a major role in Central Asian gas production and export is a key issue for Russia’s energy industry. Moscow has been able to wield substantial influence over the former Soviet states, with a few exceptions, through political and economic confederations like the Eurasian Economic Union, and CIS. A constant threat of extremism always looms large in the primarily authoritarian Islamic Republics of Central Asia. Russia’s own territory has been threatened by the spillover from Afghanistan (and increasingly, destabilized states in West Asia) through Central Asia, by Islamic militancy, terrorism, and drug trafficking. The Afghanistan problem has, consequently, always been considered a major issue for Russian security. Islamist radicalization has been a constant threat, compounded by narcotics flowing from Afghanistan. Moscow’s interests in the region primarily relate to three issues: narcotics flowing from Afghanistan; the growing imprint of the Islamic State; and the long term presence of the US in the region. These concerns have a strong impact on Russia’s interests both at a domestic as well a regional level.

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28 Ibid.

The Drug Problem

The growing inflow of opium and its derivatives from Afghanistan via Central Asian countries is an urgent issue for Moscow. Russia is both a trans-shipment and final destination for narcotics from Afghanistan. There has been an annual increase in the flow of drugs, mainly opiates from Afghanistan, through what is called the ‘Northern Route’, which has become a significant external threat to the Central Asian region and Russia. Moreover, drugs in Afghanistan have strong links with insurgency and instability in the region. The Federal Statistics Agency of Russia estimates that there are 8.5 million drug users in the country and 1.5 million heroin addicts. Each year illegal drug use reportedly kills 70,000 persons in Russia. According to Viktor Ivanov, Director of the Federal Drug Control Service of Russia, “Over the past 14 years, since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghan heroin has killed more than one million people in Eurasia, including at least half a million Russian citizens.” In the 61st session of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs in March 2018, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Oleg Syromolotov expressed concern about the current drug boom in Afghanistan. At the same time, Moscow is talking about engaging with various regional and international platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), to counter the narcotics menace in the region.


The IS Imprint

The return of Islamic States fighters from Syria and Iraq had alarmed the Russians in 2014. The matter was compounded by the rise of the IS in Afghanistan, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK). As ISK started to gain momentum in Afghanistan, many Taliban fighters abandoned their parent organisations and started joining the new formation. The most noticeable case was of Qari Hekmat, a prominent Taliban leader in Jowzjan, who switched allegiance to join the IS-affiliate in the Jowzjan Province. His group was joined by about 400 IS-affiliated fighters from China, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Chechnya. A number of Algerian and French nationals have also been identified in the largely IS-controlled District of Darzab in Jowzjan province. Since 2017, Afghanistan has witnessed a steep spike in the numbers of attack carried out by IS, leading to huge civilian casualties. Despite the April 13, 2017, U.S. targeted bombing on an extensive IS tunnel-and-cave complex in Nangarhar with the largest non-nuclear bomb in the U.S. arsenal, a GBU-43 [Massive Ordnance Air Blast, MOAB, also called the Mother of All Bombs], the IS still constitutes a major threat to the region.\footnote{Bezhan, Frud, “Islamic State Proving Resilient In Afghanistan In Face Of Targeted Campaign.”, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 5 Aug. 2017, www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-proving-resilient-afghanistan-targeted-campaign/28659602.html.}

The IS problem for Central Asia can be compounded by any potential spillover from Afghanistan, adding to the security threats in the region. There is a real possibility of Afghan IS fighters joining forces with Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and other fighters in Central Asia. Unlike the Taliban, which claims to be fighting for Afghanistan, the IS forces are primarily a transnational movement with tendency to expand beyond any
one country or region. The growing concern in Russia in this regard was highlighted by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks at the SCO Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs Meet at Beijing on April 24, 2018, when he observed that IS was “becoming entrenched in Afghanistan’s northern provinces, which border on our allies in the CSTO. This certainly means that we must redouble our efforts to preclude the proliferation of conflicts from Afghanistan.”

At a tactical level, the booming opium production and increasing IS foothold in Afghanistan provide Russia a rallying point against US-led forces in that country. Russia has used various platforms to criticize the US and the international community for its failure to combat and control drugs, as well as to stop the growing IS imprint. Through these devices, Russia also seeks to alleviate its third concern: the long term presence of American forces in the region.

**US Presence: Russia’s overlapping Security and Strategic Interests**

Russia and the US are locked in a bloody conflict in Syria. Respective interests and capabilities of the two countries have determined the kind of support they have been able to provide to the opposing camps in Syria. The prolonged conflict in Afghanistan and any unprecedented effect leading to instability in any of the Central Asian countries might give the Americans

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33 Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions following a meeting of the SCO Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, April 24, 2018, retrieved from http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3190325.

a reason to create a permanent military base in Afghanistan, or worse, seek expansion into Central Asia. American expansion in the Central Asian region or a permanent base in Afghanistan will put Russian interests at risk. First, despite Russia’s strongholds in the region, the American presence will reduce Moscow’s strategic depth. The United States maintained two bases in Central Asia, in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, for its postwar operations in Afghanistan. However, under immense pressure from Russia and China, the US was forced to evict these in 2005 and 2014, respectively. The Uzbek and the Kyrgyz Government were not able to handle the pressure because of their significant dependence on the Russian Government.

Secondly, the US presence and consequent influence in the region will diversify control of oil and natural resources. Russia and its ally China currently control the majority of oil export routes from reserves in Central Asia and the Caspian region. Diversification may break the Russian energy-transit monopoly, and would also open the region to intensified competition over energy resources. With the Russian economy still in an evolving stage, it avoiding any contest for energy dominance with the US is entirely natural.

THE RUSSIAN STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN

The relative intractability of the Afghan environment as well as the decline of its own economy has forced Russia to pursue its goals in Afghanistan at a multilateral, rather than bilateral level. Moscow has adopted a two pronged strategy to address both its concern and its interests. First, in order to limit the influence of the US-led international forces, it is working with multiple actors and stakeholders in the regions. Russia’s new-found love for Pakistan, once the staunchest of US allies in the war against the Soviet Union, is a part of this new strategy in the region. Similarly, the scrapping of the Iran nuclear deal by the Trump Administration will further strengthen ties between Tehran and Moscow, even as Iran would now be more apprehensive of the US presence in the region. Finally, the grouping of Central Asian countries on the Afghan periphery, as well as China’s dominant presence adds to Russia’s advantages.

Secondly, in order to control the threats arising in Afghanistan, Moscow is working in parallel with regional players, and at the same time adding collective pressure on the international forces in Afghanistan to address the threat of narcotics and the IS.

CONSOLIDATE AND CONTAIN

The rising violence and the increasing instability in Afghanistan are mere symptoms of the continuously failing failed strategy of the US-led international forces. The resulting apprehensions among regional and sub-regional players of the possible vacuum that would be created by the withdrawal of the international community, or of Afghanistan turning into a failed state, has forced these players to look for alternatives. Russia, in order to protect its interests, and also to alleviate
concerns of some regional player, is actively strengthening various regional and global forums to bring all the stakeholders together.

On January 19, 2018, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov asked the UN to deliberate on the “Formation of regional partnerships in Afghanistan and Central Asia” as a model for coordinating security and development. In the same speech, he talked about the Russian initiatives in the form of the Moscow format, the work of the SCO-Afghanistan contact group and developing Afghanistan’s partnership with the CSTO, in cooperation with Russian partners and fellow-thinkers.39

One of the successful examples of the Russian initiative is gaining consensus among the many regional players on the Moscow Format- a plan to incorporate local players in the peace process, including the Taliban. At the International High-Level Conference on Afghanistan “Peace process, security cooperation and regional connectivity,” at Tashkent on March 27, 2018, Russia was able to bring all the Afghan neighbours on the table. Russia, China, India, Iran, and the Central Asian countries participated in the conference.40 One of the key issues discussed during the conference was the appropriateness of direct “bargaining” in a political crisis. The direct bargaining


in the case of Afghanistan is the condition in which both the Afghan government and the Taliban sit together for dialogue without any precondition.

**Security Through Multi-Lateral Platforms**

Russia is actively proposing new mechanisms in the existing platforms, to engage more and more players of prominence. It is working on the security aspects of multiple platforms as a collective alternative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Forces in Afghanistan. As an alternative to NATO, Russia supports the development of strengthened regional security arrangements in which it would have a greater influence.\(^1\) Engagement and cooperation with CSTO is an issue of importance to Afghanistan as, from the perspective of the CSTO member-states, Central Asian stability is linked directly to Afghan stability.\(^2\) Similarly, Russia was instrumental in reviving the SCO-contact group after a seven-year hiatus, when they meet in October 2017. One of the key highlights of the summit was the deliberations on terrorism as a key common security threat.\(^3\)

Russia has been able to rally the CIS behind it, in its support for Afghanistan. In 2016, the member countries signed 17 agreements, including a statement on combating international terrorism and an agreement on military cooperation through 2020. Addressing the media, Russian President Vladimir

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\(^2\) CSTO Statutory Bodies http://www.odkb-csto.org/.

\(^3\) “SCO Resumes Afghanistan Contact Group Meeting after 7 years”, *ToloNews*, October 11, 2017, retrieved from https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/sco-resumes-afghanistan-contact-group-meeting-after-7-years.
Putin observed that closer military cooperation was necessary because “the situation [in Afghanistan] is close to becoming critical.”

Moscow has been able to bring many regional players including China, Pakistan and Iran under its initiatives for a coordinated response to the threat of terrorism and Narcotics arising from Afghanistan. India is another key player in the region with substantial positive influence in Afghanistan, largely the result of its resources of culture, values as well as economic aid to the Government of Afghanistan. The use of soft power is a crucial tool against terrorism and insurgency, supplementing the application of hard power. India, therefore, presents itself as a formidable partner in Afghanistan.

Can There Be Convergence of Indian and Russian Interests?

India’s benign presence in Afghanistan throughout history has now been overshadowed by its rivalry with Pakistan. However, Delhi’s interests in the region extend well beyond just countering Pakistan, which it blames for harbouring terrorist groups that operate both against India and Afghanistan. India has time and again reiterated that it would like a stable government and environment in Afghanistan, and Kabul has been sensitive to Delhi’s interests. India’s support for a stable Afghanistan is also influence by several extraneous factors, including India’s historic conflict with Pakistan. Islamabad, through its proxies in Afghanistan, has used Kabul’s territory

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against India. Moreover, India’s expanding economy and search for markets in Central Asia via Iran and Afghanistan also enters into this unstable dynamic.46

India shares strong bilateral ties with Afghanistan, as well as with both Russia and the US. Though India is not a major player in Afghanistan, its soft power is significant, and has resulted in both major power blocs seeking its support in Afghanistan.

While announcing his South Asia policy, Donald Trump recognized India’s contribution in rebuilding Afghanistan, and asked Delhi to increase its involvement in the region in terms of economic assistance and development.47 India is considered to be one of the rare constructive regional players in Afghanistan. Sten Rynning, a Research Fellow with the NATO Europe-Atlantic Partnership Council, has argued that India is poised to go from soft power to hard power (in Afghanistan).48 Delhi has, however, till date, avoided flexing its hard power in Afghanistan.

During the recently held informal summit between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Putin, India thanked Russia for its inclusion in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). For the first time, the two countries have decided to undertake a joint project — possibly

in the development sector — in Afghanistan. However, there are some concerns in India about Russia’s new alignments in the region. India is particularly concerned about the growing ties between Pakistan and Russia. In February 2018, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov acknowledged Pakistan’s counter terror efforts and suggested continued assistance to Pakistan to bolster its counterterrorism capabilities. This development is in stark contrast to the principled stand Russia had taken against Pakistan’s support to terrorism in the past. India has legitimately argued that one cannot fight terrorism by allying with a country like Pakistan, which promotes terrorism. By bolstering Rawalpindi’s counterterrorism capabilities, Russia might play into the hands of the Pakistan Army, which has a long history of using such capabilities to promote terrorism.

Russia was instrumental in bringing both India and Pakistan into SCO, in order to enable cooperation between the two countries at a multilateral level. It might, however, end up injecting more uncertainty into the neighbourhood, particularly on the issue of Afghanistan. Although India has softened its stance over the issue of peace talks with the Taliban, it is less likely that Delhi would accept any ‘alternative model’, which gives significant room to the Taliban or, in other words, to Pakistan. Pakistan certainly would want a government in Afghanistan which is hostile to India, and pliant and supportive to Islamabad’s interests. It is unlikely that Russia will be able


to bring India and Pakistan together to a mutually agreeable position on Afghanistan.

The Russian stand on China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative is, again, in sharp contrast to India’s, particularly on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) component. According to the Asian Competitiveness Annual Report 2018, moreover, CPEC is being extended into Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{51} Russia’s Acting Ambassador to Pakistan, while delivering a talk to members of the Faisalabad Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FCCI), stated that Russia was ‘eagerly awaiting’ a formal invitation from China and Pakistan to invest in CPEC.\textsuperscript{52} India considers the CPEC project to be in violation of its territorial integrity. India has strong objections to the project, as it passes through Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), which is Indian territory.\textsuperscript{53} Russia’s willingness to join CPEC will not only give legitimacy to Pakistan’s occupation of Indian territory, and would certainly be seen in Delhi as a sign of Russian insensitivity to India’s sovereignty. Incidentally, CPEC is also backed by the US,

Further, the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan has raised Indian concerns about the expansion of China’s direct strategic imprint. It would, at the same time, give Pakistan genuine reasons for further meddling in Afghan affairs, to the detriment of India’s interests.


In all likelihood, Russian involvement in Afghanistan would follow patterns no different from the US intervention, which has relied heavily on Pakistan. On the other hand, the changing trajectory of the Russian-Pakistan-China relation hardly justifies any optimism regarding India’s future prospects in Afghanistan.

**CONCLUSION**

The spiraling violence in Afghanistan simply confirms the colossal failure of US strategy in the region. The US has not only failed to control and combat the violent activities of insurgent groups, it has largely failed to build sustainable political institutions. The kind of flip-flop the Trump Administration has performed on Afghanistan has only exacerbated the situation. While unveiling his South Asia Policy in August 2017, Trump had given particular prominence to his Afghanistan policy, acknowledging Pakistan’s predatory strategy in the region, and warning Islamabad to mend its ways. However, no concrete action followed against Pakistani institutions which actively continue to patronize militant groups in Afghanistan. Similarly, Trump had clearly stated that the US Government would not be involved in nation-building in Afghanistan, but would direct its resource against the insurgents. This demonstrated an enduring lack of vision, even as increasing the air strikes and bombings on the terrorist hide-outs failed to produce satisfactory results.

It is, consequently, natural for regional players to be apprehensive of US policy and its fading impact on peace and security in the region. This creates widening strategic spaces for Russia as a legitimate stakeholder, to address its interests and concerns, and augment its influence, in the region. The Russian policy for Afghanistan does offer some positive elements, to the extent that it has been able to secure collective support to
address elements of the Afghan problem. There are, however, major flaws and perversities as well. The most significant of these is the duality of its response to the Afghan insurgency; on one hand, Moscow wants the international community to come down hard on the IS; on the other, it has taken a soft line on the Taliban and on Pakistan, while it focuses its military-strategic anti-insurgency response solely against the Islamic State.

Further, contemporary Russian foreign policy objectives suggest hardly any change in Moscow’s orientation towards the US. Moscow’s concerns are still driven by the strategic centrality of a containment policy directed against the US. However, strategic brinkmanship by both Putin and the US will only add to the instability of the region. Syria is a perfect case study of how not to handle terrorism and terrorists.

Finally, Russia has mobilized its resources to re-establish its primacy through an overambitious plan to include all stakeholders in the region. The plan is likely to backfire, in case the interests of individual players are compromised. In India’s case, the Russia-China-Pakistan alliance is visibly detrimental. Moreover, if Russia approaches Afghanistan as zero sum game\textsuperscript{54} against the US, the outcome can only be catastrophic.

Tinkering with political players like the Taliban is one thing, whereas managing the evolving security environment in Afghanistan quite another. Whatever resources Moscow possesses as a strategic driver in the region, Russia and its allies are completely incapable of replacing the US in Afghanistan. Russia and China cannot hope to match the kind of economic and military assistance the US can bring to Afghanistan.

\textsuperscript{54} In international relations, a Zero Sum Game is a theoretical framework within the political realism school of thought that explains interstate relation in terms of power, where each state wants to maximize its gain in terms of military, economic and strategic power at the cost of the adversary.
Finally, in its new ‘great game’ with the US, Russia has abandoned the principled stand it had taken against terrorism and Pakistan’s role in the region. Moscow needs to revisit some of its present policies in view of Russia’s chequered history in the region.