

RUSSIAN PRIORITIES IN AFGHANISTAN AFTER 9/11: TRANSITION FROM COOPERATION WITH THE WEST TO RESISTANCE⁶

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Abstract: *The article examines the evolution of Russia's foreign policy in Afghanistan over the past 20 years after the events of 9/11 in New York. It is noted that the initially constructive cooperation between Russia and Western countries to resolve the situation in Afghanistan gradually turned into a kind of rivalry and clash of interests. The priority directions of Russia's foreign policy approaches in Afghanistan, as well as the main challenges and threats from this country, have been studied.*

B.Buzan and O.Wæver believe that Russia is the dominant power in the post-Soviet Regional Security Complex, which links several subcomplexes of this RSC. The use by Russian officials of the term “near abroad” in relation to the former Soviet republics demonstrates the centring of the RSC on the Russian Federation. The preservation of the status of a great power by Russia depends on keeping the CIS countries in its sphere of influence, which dictates the vigorous activity of the Russian leadership within these limits. Russia has constantly pursued an active foreign policy towards Afghanistan⁷, since it considered its location near the Central Asian region, which it considered to be its “strategic soft underbelly”⁸. It was interested in maintaining the “buffer status” of Afghanistan, dividing the spheres of influence of the USSR, and then Russia and the West. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia, as a result of the reduction of its military-political and financial capabilities, for some

⁶This article was initially published in the Edited volume by Amina Khan “Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: International and Regional Perspectives”, Center for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, June 2022.

⁷ Buzan B. and Waever O. Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. – P.397-439.

⁸ Skalamera M. Russia's Lasting Influence in Central Asia, *Survival*, 59:6, 123-142, 2017. DOI:10.1080/00396338.2017.1399731

time did not pay sufficient attention to the development of the situation in Afghanistan.

Russia and Afghanistan in 1990s and 2000s: rupture and revival of relations

In 1992, after the termination of financial and military-technical support from the Russian Federation to the government of M. Najibullah, power in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) passed to a political group headed by B.Rabbani and A.Massoud. However, after the capture of the capital Kabul by the Taliban in 1996, the Russian Federation re-established cooperation with the leaders of the Northern Alliance, B.Rabbani and A.Massoud, in order to keep the north of the country out of the control of the Taliban⁹. The interests of the Russian Federation at that time were limited to the goals of maintaining security and stability in the immediate vicinity of the borders of the countries of Central Asia, since the leadership of the Russian Federation was afraid of possible Taliban aggression in the countries of the region and the spread among their population of ideas of fundamentalism, religious extremism and terrorism. It is noteworthy that after the start of the US and NATO operation in Afghanistan in October 2001, Russia became one of the first countries in the world to support these actions¹⁰. This can be explained by several factors.

1. Expectation of a successful confrontation and expulsion of representatives of various terrorist groups from the territories of the IRA bordering the Central Asian region. The events in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan in 1999, and in the Sariosiyo and Uzun regions of Uzbekistan in 2000 clearly demonstrated the relevance of the threat of terrorist groups' infiltration from the territory of Afghanistan.

2. The possibility of destroying the training camps for terrorists from the North Caucasian republics of the Russian Federation in order to ensure the stability and security of these subjects of the federation. According to the UN, Chechen illegal armed groups had close ties with the Taliban and

⁹ Dobbins J. Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan // February 26, 2009. www.rand.org

¹⁰ Hill F. The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran // August 15, 2002. <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/the-united-states-and-russia-in-central-asia-uzbekistan-tajikistan-afghanistan-pakistan-and-iran/>

al-Qaeda units in Afghanistan; Chechen terrorist groups received financial assistance and had the opportunity to train new fighters on Afghan territory¹¹.

3. Interest in strengthening the positions of the representatives of the Northern Alliance, with whom Moscow unofficially maintained contacts in order to limit the spread of the influence of the Taliban in the regions of the country bordering the republics of Central Asia.

4. Expanding cooperation with the US and the West in bilateral and multilateral formats. V. Putin, who took office as President of the Russian Federation in 2000, at that time considered it expedient to develop relations and establish multifaceted cooperation with the West.

At the first stages, the Russian Federation did not express dissatisfaction with the American military presence in the countries of Central Asia. Perhaps the leadership of the Russian Federation considered it inappropriate to prevent the creation of American logistics points in Central Asia, since the benefits of cooperation with the West seemed attractive compared to the prospect of a confrontation with the US and NATO over their military presence in the region.

Let us consider the measures taken by Russia in resolving the situation in Afghanistan. In 2008, Russia and NATO signed an agreement on the transit of non-military goods for the needs of the international coalition through Russian territory¹². In 2009, Russia opened its airspace to US aircraft carrying military supplies for Afghanistan¹³. In August 2012, it was planned to start using the airport in Ulyanovsk as a transshipment point for the return transit of ISAF cargo¹⁴. However, later the parties could not come to a compromise on the conditions and cost of operating this facility. In this regard, the head of the NATO and US

¹¹ Anand Vinod. Export of holy terror to Chechnya from Pakistan and Afghanistan, *Strategic Analysis*, 24:3, 539-551, 2000. DOI: 10.1080/09700160008455231

¹² Weitz R. *Global Security Watch-Russia: A Reference Handbook* // – California: Greenwood, 2010. P.121

¹³ United States-Russia Military Transit Agreement // June 6, 2009. www.whitehouse.gov

¹⁴ Von Twickel N. NATO Afraid Of Russian Snooping At Ulyanovsk? // Atlantic Council, 22 February 2013. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/nato-afraid-of-russian-snooping-at-ulyanovsk/>

representatives said that they do not intend to use the transit point in Ulyanovsk during the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan¹⁵.

By stepping up its participation in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) of goods to Afghanistan, the Russian Federation sought to solve several problems.

Firstly, cooperation within the framework of the transit of goods could smooth out a number of acute issues between the Russian Federation and the West. These include the following: the creation of position points for US missile defense system in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the stabilization of the situation in Syria, the solution of the Iranian nuclear program, the prevention of a new crisis wave in the global economy and overcoming the negative consequences of the 2008 crisis, energy export routes in space CIS and others.

Secondly, the transit of goods through the territory of Russia could bring financial dividends; According to Western media, by the end of 2014, the US military planned to transport approximately 100,000 containers and 50,000 vehicles from Afghanistan, a third of which could be carried out through the NDN¹⁶. The US Department of Defense stated that the transit of one container through this route might cost about 17.5 thousand US dollars¹⁷.

Russia, like other countries of the world, was interested in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan and neutralizing threats to national security due to the military conflict. Participation of the Russian Federation in settling the situation in Afghanistan was diverse. In order to support the IRA government, Russia wrote off the country's debt for a total of \$12 billion¹⁸. For several years, Russian companies have been unsuccessfully negotiating the restoration of 142 facilities created in Afghanistan during the Soviet period. As part of these negotiations with the Afghan side, projects are being discussed for the reconstruction of the Salang Tunnel,

¹⁵ NATO seeks cheaper alternative to Russian transport hub – official // April 2, 2013. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/nato-seeks-cheaper-alternative-to-russian-transport-hub-official/>

¹⁶ Whitlock C. Northern land routes to be crucial in U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan // Washington Post, 05.07.2012

¹⁷ Tynan D. Central Asia: Who's the Big Winner in the NDN Sweepstakes? // EurasiaNet, 07.02.2012. www.eurasianet.org

¹⁸ Chandra V. Russia's Growing Afghan Re-Engagement, Strategic Analysis, 35:4, 552-558, 2011. DOI: 10.1080/09700161.2011.576091

hydroelectric power plants in Naghlu, Sarobi and Mahipar worth \$500 million, as well as programs for the construction of wells and irrigation systems, also worth \$500 million¹⁹.

Afghan personnel were trained in various fields of activity, including civilian and military specialists. Thus, from 2005 to 2013, about 3,000 representatives of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the countries of Central Asia were trained in the Russian Federation as part of a joint program with NATO to train drug police officers²⁰. In addition, Russia considered projects to support the Kabul Polytechnic University, restore and equip auto-mechanical technical schools in Kabul and Khost province, as well as an oil and gas technical school in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif²¹.

The Russian Federation continued to provide military-technical assistance to the security forces of Afghanistan. In 2002-2005 it provided \$200 million worth of gratuitous military technical assistance to the Afghan army. In 2009, together with the Federal Republic of Germany, two helicopters with medical evacuation equipment were handed over to Kabul. At the end of 2010, a gratuitous supply of Russian small arms for the needs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the IRA was carried out, including 20 thousand Kalashnikov assault rifles and 2.5 million cartridges for them²². In May 2011, the Rosoboronexport company and the US Department of Defense signed a contract for the supply of 21 Mi-17V5 military transport helicopters to Afghanistan in the amount of 367.5 million US dollars²³. Russia was supportive of initiatives to expand military-technical cooperation with Afghanistan, so, it intended to give a positive response to the IRA's request for additional supplies of small arms. However, after the imposition of Western sanctions due to the

¹⁹ Nemtsova A. Russia Invades Afghanistan—Again // *Newsweek*, 02.04.2010

²⁰ Malik, Nadeem. "Overview and Prospects for Energy Resources in Afghanistan: Measures for Improvement and Sustainable Development." *The Journal of Energy and Development* 35, no. 1/2 (2009): 141–64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24812717>

²¹ Menkiszak M. Russia's Afghan Problem: The Russian Federation and the Afghanistan problem since 2001 // The Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 2012. https://aei.pitt.edu/58389/1/prace_38_en_0.pdf

²² Tsygankov A. Russia's Afghanistan Debate, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 60:6, 29-41, 2013. DOI: 10.2753/PPC1075-8216600603

²³ US DoD orders additional Mi-17 helicopters from Rosoboronexport // *Army Technology*, 17 June 2013. <https://www.army-technology.com/news/newsus-dod-orders-additional-mi-17-helicopters-from-rosoboronexport/>

Crimean annexation in 2014 and the situation in the Ukrainian Donbas region, the implementation of these plans was suspended.

NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014: opportunity and challenge for Russia

The participation of the Russian Federation in resolving the situation in the IRA is not limited just to providing transit opportunities for the countries of the international coalition within the framework of the NDN. Considering the withdrawal of the international coalition troops in 2014, Moscow began to intensify its foreign policy activities in the Afghan direction and touch upon the problem of stabilizing Afghanistan within the framework of multilateral cooperation formats (UN, SCO, CSTO).

For a more accurate and complete description of the threats and challenges to the national security of the Russian Federation arising from the ongoing tension in Afghanistan, several factors can be identified.

1. Drug trafficking. According to UN estimates, in 2000s annually from 75 to 80 tons of heroin entered the Russian Federation, the main part comes from Afghanistan²⁴. There were approximately 2 million drug addicts in the country, most of whom use heroin, with more than 100,000 deaths each year²⁵. In connection with these horrendous indicators, Russia called on NATO member countries to fight more actively against drug crops directly on the territory of the IRA. However, the forces of the international coalition feared that the active destruction of such crops would lead to a significant increase in the discontent of the inhabitants of Afghanistan, since the production of drugs is one of the main sources of their livelihood.

To limit the spread of drugs, Russia, together with the CSTO member countries, annually conducted “Channel” joint operations to intercept drugs from the IRA. Afghan officers were trained at the training centre of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia in the city of Domodedovo, Moscow Region. In addition, the government of the Russian Federation

²⁴ World Drug Report 2010 // UNODC, 2010. https://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf

²⁵ Kramer John M. Drug Abuse in Russia, Problems of Post-Communism, 58:1, 31-43, 2011. DOI: 10.2753/PPC1075-8216580103

provides financial and technical assistance to the anti-drug services of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

In our opinion, the situation in this area will not change radically in the short term for the following reasons:

- low level of coordination between the activities of law enforcement agencies of the Russian Federation and a number of CIS countries in detecting drug trafficking;
- high level of corruption in government and law enforcement structures of certain CIS countries;
- lack of a systemic action plan and a well-established structure to combat the spread of drugs in the Russian Federation.

2. Terrorism. It is known that members of terrorist groups operating in the North Caucasian republics of Russia have contacts with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, are trained and participate in clashes with the forces of the international coalition on the territory of the IRA. Russia feared that if NATO failed and withdrew troops from Afghanistan, then it would face an extremely negative development of the situation with neighbouring countries: the Taliban and other religious extremists, encouraged by success, will begin to spread in all directions, including to the north, overflowing the countries Central Asia, as well as to the west in the direction of the North Caucasian republics of the Russian Federation²⁶. The emergence of sources of instability in individual countries of Central Asia as a result of the actions of terrorist groups can lead to the creation of conflict centres in the border areas of the Russian Federation.

3. Military bases. The presence of US and NATO military forces on the territory of Afghanistan worried Moscow, as it views Central Asia as a “region in which there are privileged interests of Russia”²⁷. Consequently, the presence of other powers in the region limits Moscow's ability to influence the development of the situation in the region. In this aspect, one can consider the Moscow-influenced decision by Kyrgyzstan not to renew the agreement on the operation of the American base in

²⁶ Aliyev Nurlan. How Russia Views Afghanistan Today. // War on the Rocks, 19 October 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/russias-contemporary-afghan-policy/>

²⁷ Jensen Donald N. Russia and its Neighbors: the Limits of the Kremlin's “Privileged Interests” // Institute of Modern Russia, 2 October 2013. <https://imrussia.org/en/politics/563-russia-and-its-neighbors-the-limits-of-the-kremlins-privileged-interests>

Bishkek and to close the cargo transit centre at the Manas airport on July 11, 2014²⁸.

4. Moscow's cautious approach to the US initiatives of “Greater Central Asia” and “New Silk Road”, which proposed the activization of trade, economic and infrastructural reorientation of the countries of Central Asia to the South Asian region. In view of the fact that a number of Central Asian countries demonstrated interest in the implementation of infrastructure projects (TAPI gas pipeline, CASA-1000 power lines) within the framework of the US New Silk Road concept, Russia, through participation in these projects, sought to some extent control the stages of construction and further operation of these facilities. It is supposed to prevent attempts by the countries of the region to diversify the routes for the supply of energy resources and other goods, thereby reducing dependence on the Russian Federation.

Since Russia did not have effective leverage of influence on the course of events in the IRA, in 2000s it considered the United States and other countries participating in the international coalition forces as priority partners in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan. A sharp deterioration in relations between Russia and the West could lead to curtailment of cooperation on the Afghan problem. Russia preferred to observe the actions of the government in Afghanistan after the presidential elections in 2014 and the withdrawal of the main part of the international coalition troops, its attempts to keep the situation in the country under control, the activation of the Taliban throughout the Afghan territory, and also to observe the development of events in IRA. Only since 2016, the Russian Federation began to take more active actions on Afghanistan and organized a series of negotiations in Moscow to resolve the Afghan problem with the participation of Pakistan, China, Iran, India and the Central Asian state.

Deterioration of Russia-West relations in Afghanistan

Developments in Syria after 2011 and Ukraine after 2014 considerably undermined cooperation between Russia and the NATO forces in Afghanistan. The increasing mistrust and misunderstanding led

²⁸ Marat E. Kyrgyzstan's Decision To Renounce Manas Transit Center Favors Russia // 26 June 2013 www.cacianalyst.org

to the revival of competition between these powers on the Afghan territory. Against the backdrop of difficult relations with Western countries, Russia tried to become more actively involved in the processes in Afghanistan and demonstrate its influence and capabilities in the region. At the same time, the reduction of the military presence of the US and NATO countries in Afghanistan after 2014 was perceived as a convenient chance to consolidate the Russian presence in Afghanistan.

As the presence of the US and other Western countries in the IRA was reduced, the Russian Federation pushed to strengthen its own military-political presence in the Central Asian region. For the Russian leadership, maintaining and strengthening the military presence in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is of particular importance, as Russia seeks to strengthen its position mainly in this area, without giving priority to strengthening the economic component of cooperation with the countries of Central Asia. Therefore, in 2012 Russia reached an agreement with Tajikistan to extend the hosting of its military base until 2042²⁹. Kyrgyzstan decided not to prolong the hosting agreement with the NATO base on its Manas airport in 2014³⁰.

Confrontation between Russia-US reached to the extent that Washington concluded that a Russian military intelligence unit secretly offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants for killing coalition forces in Afghanistan – including argeting American troops³¹. However, later US officials acknowledged that these assumptions were not based on specific evidence³². Complete withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 has been a positive development for the Moscow interests in Central Asia.

Upon taking office, Russian President Vladimir Putin adopted a hard line against the Taliban. In March 2000, senior Kremlin officials

²⁹ Kozhevnikov R. Russia, Tajikistan strike outline deal on military base. // Reuters, 17 July 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-tajikistan-russia-base-idUKBRE86G0OV20120717>

³⁰ Dzhuraev S. Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy Change: Kyrgyzstan's U-Turns on the U.S. Air Base at Manas Airport, Central Asian Affairs, 8(2), 175-202, 2021. doi: <https://doi.org/10.30965/22142290-bja10018>

³¹ Savage Ch. et all. Russia Secretly Offered Afghan Militants Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says. // The New York Times, 26 June 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/us/politics/russia-afghanistan-bounties.html>

³² Myers M. There may not have been Russian bounties on US troops in Afghanistan after all. // Military Times, 14 April 2021. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2021/04/15/there-may-not-have-been-russian-bounties-on-us-troops-in-afghanistan-after-all/>

warned the Taliban that Russia was prepared to conduct airstrikes against Chechen training camps in Afghanistan. In 2003, the Russian Supreme Court designated the Taliban as a terrorist organization banned from operating on Russian soil³³. However, under new circumstances Putin urged the international community to unfreeze Afghanistan's central bank reserves, restore financial aid programs for the country and gradually welcome the Taliban into "the civilized family of nations." Such measures, the Russian leader argued, were necessary to prevent the "disintegration" of Afghanistan. He also said that Russia is moving towards excluding the Taliban from its list of extremist organisations³⁴. However, the activation of internal power struggle between Taliban and some other groups area making the relations between Moscow and Taliban is causing the reconsideration of the Russia's positive approach to the current government in Kabul.

Russia's more active cooperation with the countries of Central Asia and other states neighbouring Afghanistan could increase the effectiveness of Moscow's role in settling the Afghan conflict. In the short term, it is possible that Russia will strive to implement infrastructure projects in the territory of the IRA, for example, it will try to get the opportunity to conduct geological exploration, and subsequently, the extraction of minerals in Afghanistan, especially in the north of the country.

It seems that the Russian Federation has not yet developed a clear strategy in relation to Afghanistan, its policy is dominated not by systemic and strategic decisions, but more often by situational and tactical response to developments in this country. Russia's actions to resolve the Afghan problem largely depend on the level of relations with the United States and other NATO member countries.

It is obvious that building the foreign policy of the Russian Federation in relation to the IRA in close cooperation with the countries of Central Asia on an equal footing with mutual consideration of interests

³³ Simes D. Russia puts Taliban on 'probation' with Central Asia on knife edge. // Nikkei Asia, 26 October 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Russia-puts-Taliban-on-probation-with-Central-Asia-on-knife-edge>

³⁴ Putin says Russia is mulling excluding Taliban from list of extremist groups. // Reuters, 21 October 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-is-mulling-excluding-taliban-list-extremist-groups-2021-10-21/>

is beneficial for all parties. A balance in Russia's cooperation with the United States and the West on the Afghan settlement and interaction with regional countries on the issues of stabilizing Afghanistan can give positive results in the short term.

Conclusion

Russia's Afghanistan policy is closely linked to its interests in Central Asia. The presence of the Western military coalition in Afghanistan was perceived by Russia positively before the degradation its relations with the US and EU. The level of cooperation between Russia and China in Afghanistan is increasing. However, the credibility and long-term nature of this partnership is unclear. At the same time Russia will be cautious of military involvement or financial investments in Afghanistan. Taliban movement's takeover is used to increase the alarmism in Central Asia and to strengthen Russia's military and political presence in the region. Long term confrontation between Russia and the West may bring new complications to Afghanistan. Usage of the Afghan territory in the new great power competition will further complicate the revival of the country and its economy. Without compatible security improvement the expectation of any kind investments into the country might be too risky for many international corporations and financial institutions.

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