

Post-2014 Afghanistan: An Analysis of the Russian Interests in the Region

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Abstract

Russian Federation is the major power that has its involvement in Afghanistan for the last 140 years. Though its role diminished after the Soviet withdrawal from the latter in 1989 but its interests were closely tied with the political developments in this war-torn country. Since the US/NATO intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11 Russia supported the international coalition to eradicate terrorist outfits and dislodge the Taliban regime in Kabul but much has changed in the last decade. Now after the drawdown of US/NATO forces from Afghanistan, a new Great Game is in the offing in the region and the Russian Federation also has its own interest. This paper aims analyses of the strategic, political and economic interests of Moscow and explores the challenges it faces in achieving these objectives. Terrorism and drug trafficking are the two threats that have put the Russian interests at stake while US and China are the competitors that may pose challenges to the Russian influence in the region. Inside Afghanistan, China has minimal support and the Taliban are not in favor of Moscow. Pakistan, the most influential player in Afghanistan, is also not on good term with Russia. Russia has limited and difficult choices to enhance its influence in the region, secure its interests and to cope with existing challenges.

Keywords: Russia; Afghanistan; US/NATO; Drawdown; 2014

Introduction

The US/NATO drawdown from Afghanistan will definitely affect the security equation in the Central, South and West Asia. A peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan will open a new chapter of political and economic cooperation among these three strategically important regions of Asia while instability will cause regional security threats to all the stakeholders. The spillover effect of instability in Afghanistan will bring a shift in the balance of power from Central Asia to China. Beside other neighboring countries, both China and Russia will become major players in the Central Asian region. Race for influence will give rise to a new Great Game.

Russia has been the most influential player in Afghanistan and Central Asia even before the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 (Brooke,

2013). It has actively engaged in this landlocked hard terrain from 1979 to 1989. But, in the wake of Soviet withdrawal and subsequent collapse of Soviet Union in 1990s its role has shrunk due to a number of factors. In the decade after the disintegration of the USSR, the internal political and economic compulsions did not allow Moscow to skillfully chalk out its Afghan policy. After the US/NATO intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11, Moscow deliberately kept its profile low with a hope that NATO forces would only disrupt and dismantle al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups but also rout out the Taliban and would quickly withdraw thereafter. Thus, Moscow would be free in getting access to NATO supply routes through the states of Former Soviet Central Asia (FSCA) (Nopens, March 2014). Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was considered the Russian sphere

of influence and Moscow expected the US would recognize Russian interests in the region. But all these hopes dashed to the ground. Thus, the Russian distrust of the US further increased. Consequently, adopting a different course, Russia supported the Northern Alliance to build up pressure to make Karzai adopt a posture independent from the United States. But it did not bring any positive outcome. Contrary to the Russian expectations, Moscow's offer to cooperate in security and rebuilding the old Soviet built infrastructure in Afghanistan was turned down (Nopens, March 2014). The situation confounded more when the US President announced program for drawdown from the Afghan soil till the end of 2014. Some Russian commentators expressed doubts regarding the US role in Afghanistan as they believed that some of the pro-jihadist forces are in close contact with US troops and the proposed drawdown is aimed at creating problems to jeopardize Russian interests in the region. But most of them took the drawdown as a result of the budgetary compulsion as well as domestic political pressures that forced the US to leave Afghanistan. But there is unanimity of opinion that it is in the interest of both Moscow and Washington to have a viable political setup in Kabul that is capable of checking terrorism and eliminating drug traffic from Afghanistan.

Russian Federation is at the horns of the dilemma after US/NATO drawdown plan; On the one hand, there are imminent threats in the form of terrorism, Islamic extremism, growing secessionist tendencies, and hovering clouds of narcotic-related crime that can take Central Asia states and Russia into its folds; On the other hand, the loss of interest in Afghanistan on the part of NATO and its allies in the West may expedite China to enhance its influence in Afghanistan and the states of former Soviet Central Asia (FSCA) at the expense of Russia (Nopens, March 2014).

Strategic Interests

The drawdown has both positive and negative impacts for Moscow. On the one hand, the lasting presence of NATO would have eroded

Russian influence in the region and would have given direct access to the US to the hydrocarbons reserves of Central Asian Republics (CARs) which would have posed serious threats to the economic interests of the latter. On the other hand, the US/NATO drawdown provides Moscow with an opportunity to secure its strategic, political and economic objectives in the region. But challenges are far more than opportunities.

Russia's influence in Kabul is negligible over the internal political process due to the fact that due to its own economic problems it has extended only a modest aid to this war ravaged country. Being a major power of the world, it is Russia that has strategic, political and economic interests in Afghanistan. But terrorism and drug trafficking are the two major issues that trouble Moscow. To fill the security vacuum created after the drawdown of International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF), Russia will engage once again in Afghan affairs. However, this move will not remain unchallenged as there are a number of stakeholders in this hard terrain (Nopens, March 2014). To save Russian sphere of influence from the spread of terrorism and to deal with the Afghan issue effectively, Moscow has engaged Central Asian states in the form of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Efforts were made to bring Afghanistan into these regional security organizations to mitigate the scourge of terrorism. The Afghan leadership responded positively but much depends on future setup in Kabul. In 2000, the CIS Anti-Terrorist Centre has also been set up (Menkiszak, 2011). NATO drawdown will pass on the responsibility of coping with the terrorist menace to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) that is unable to fight the terrorist outfits on its own. The Taliban have become a ground reality and any future setup in Kabul cannot run the affairs of the state without taking them on board. In case of the success of Kabul Peace Process, the Taliban would have a loin share in the state affairs. The Taliban would not prove a soft

target for Russia. They would not let Moscow influence Kabul. If the Kabul peace process fails to bring fruit, then there is a likelihood of the comeback of the Taliban in an undemocratic manner (Wall, 2014). This scenario is more catastrophic for Russian interests. According to the domino effect theory, the impacts of this possible development will give rise to a new tide of terrorism that would not remain confined to Afghanistan. It may engulf the whole region and any instability in the region will pose serious challenges to Moscow, too. 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 (Menkiszak, 2011).

Keeping in view all these possible outcomes of drawdown, Moscow would engage the other regional players like Pakistan, India and Iran. But, Pakistan, the next door neighbor and most influential player in Afghanistan since 1979 is not on good terms with Russia. Russia views Pakistan the greatest supporter of the Taliban who are accused for extending implicit support to the Chechen fighters who are Muslim militants and have been in armed conflict with Russian forces. Any solution to the Afghan problem is not effective without taking Pakistan into confidence (Barno, Exum, & Irvine, June 2011). Mending fences with Pakistan would annoy India – the longtime ally of Russia.

Over the Afghan issue, Moscow and Islamabad have never been on good terms with each other since 1950s when Pakistan joined Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) – the anti-communist pacts. These tense relations further deteriorated after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Pakistan played the role of frontline state throughout the decade of Soviet presence in Afghanistan and openly supported the Afghan guerrillas against Soviet forces. Since the beginning of the Cold War, Moscow and Islamabad have been competing with each

other for influence in Kabul. This competition will resume after the US/NATO drawdown in 2014 (Nopens, March 2014). However, the future US role will be decisive in this competition as both of them have an immense strategic importance while the role of Pakistan is more vital than Moscow in the future Afghanistan. Pakistan may play the role of a peace broker if its interests are safeguarded and assured by the key stakeholder especially the United States. But Islamabad may prove more troublesome if India or Russia are preferred in the post-2014 Afghanistan. In case of Pak-US cooperation, the influence of Islamabad will enhance while it will curtail the already limited influence of Russia and this will further annoy policymakers in Moscow. In an effort to avoid such a scenario, Russia took an initiative and created the Russia Afghanistan-Pakistan ‘troika’ to sort out possibility of cooperation on border protection, counter-terrorism, information exchange and antinarcotics training, and the promotion of regional trade.

Arab countries also have their own interests in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia, Pakistan’s closest ally and Russia’s archenemy in Afghan affairs, as Moscow sees it is one of the staunchest supporters of Chechen fighters, has been involved deeply in Afghanistan and have political interests that pose challenges to Russian interests. Moscow sees Saudi Arabia more dangerous than Pakistan for Russian interest due to two reasons; firstly, Saudi Arabia is more affluent than Pakistan in economic terms and has greater means to support jihad – the Holy War; and secondly, the Americans take Pakistan as a perfidious partner while refuse to alienate Saudi Arabia for its close ties with militants (Katz, 2014).

The most powerful stakeholder in Afghanistan and greatest competitor of Russia is the US which has secured its strategic and political interests in the form of “Enduring Bilateral Strategic Agreement” between Kabul and Washington. Though a peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan best caters the interests of all stakeholders but the conflicting strategies

of these players does not allow peace to prevail on the Afghan soil (Nopens, March 2014).

Besides terrorism, Narcotics challenge also pinches Moscow in the shoe. Afghanistan is the biggest producer of opium in the world. It produces 90 percent of the world's opiates. These opiates take lives of more than one million people in the world annually. More than 35000 victims of these narco-drugs die in Russia per annum. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, two important members of the FSCA are also turning into narco-states (Nopens, March 2014). This trend will give rise to narco-terrorism, terrorism associated with illicit drugs, especially directed against law enforcement. According to Russian authorities, opium production in Afghanistan has increased forty-fold over the past nine years. Russia takes this rise as an outcome of the lack of interest on the part of ISAF to check the poppy cultivation and hesitation in taking measures against the illegal export of opiates from Afghanistan. Some Russian experts have even alleged the ISAF for directly support in illegal drug production and trafficking from Afghanistan (Menkiszak, 2011). In June 2011, Russian authorities suggested the creation of a joint EU/Russian agency to check this growing menace of drugs in Eurasia with UN and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) cooperation.

Economic Interests

China is another most potent competitor of Russian Federation not only in Afghanistan but also in Central Asia. Both Moscow and Beijing are in continuous struggle to win Central Asian Republics (CARs) for trade and access to the hydrocarbon resources in these states. The Sino challenge is detrimental to the Russian interests.

The U.S. Geological Survey has found that Afghanistan possesses 1.6 billion barrels of crude oil, 16 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 500 million barrels of natural gas liquids (Gartenstein-Ross, Trombly, & Barr, October 2014). In 2009, the Aynak Project in

Afghanistan, a Chinese firm leased the rights to copper deposit for 3.5 billion dollars that is the single largest foreign investment in mining sector in Afghanistan (Barno, Exum, & Irvine, Beyond Afghanistan A Regional Security Strategy for South and Central Asia, June 2011). China is not only the biggest investor in the mining industry of Afghanistan but also penetrating into the Central Asia in a more coherent manner. Recently China trade with Central Asia has risen to \$40 billion in 2012 that was \$527 million in 1992 (Huasheng & Kuchins, March 2012). In September 2013, President Xi Jinping signed energy deal of worth nearly \$100 billion with the FSCA during his visit to the region. Out of these deals, Turkmenistan will get \$50 billion, \$30 billion will go Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will have a share of \$15 billion. Rare metals like uranium, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, hydroelectricity, transport infrastructure and telecommunication sector in Central Asian region has also caught Chinese attention (Brooke, 2013). Beijing is focusing on extracting resources, marketing its commodities, and building infrastructure linking its Eastern provinces to the region. The network of railways and roads will make its access to raw materials and export markets free from any US interference. A pipeline system, independent of Russia's influence, has successfully been built by China in the Central Asian region (Nopens, March 2014). These moves will enable the landlocked CARs to have easy access to the ports of China that will provide an outlet to them for trade. Their growing trade and commercial ties with China may bring them out of Moscow's influence and conversely expand Beijing's influence in the region. However, China has no interest in meddling in the political structure of Afghanistan while Russia prefers to have a broad-based setup in Kabul. Russia is trying to develop cooperation on Afghanistan with both India and China – as proved by a trilateral high-level security meeting held in Beijing on 16 January 2014 (Lang, 2014).

Conclusion

Russia is facing a number of challenges in the post 2014 after the US/NATO drawdown from the region. Much of the Russian interests are at stake both at regional and international level. Russia has limited and difficult choices regarding its policies towards Afghanistan. Terrorism and drug trafficking are two most serious threats to Moscow's interests. Both of these have their roots in Afghanistan. The Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan on its border have a decisive role in mitigating these problems.

Instead of antagonist approach towards the Taliban and Pakistan, Russia should adopt a comprehensive plan to engage the Taliban leadership through good offices of Pakistan after taking Pakistan into confidence over the strategic and security concerns of Islamabad. The role of other Afghan neighbors and regional organizations like the SCO and CSTO in resolving the Afghan problem should be enhanced but the civil society of Afghanistan must be taken on board before finding any solution at regional level. To enhance Russian influence in Kabul, Moscow should take a lead in establishing a collective consortium to tackle the economic problems of Afghanistan in the post 2014 era and to lessen its dependence on distant donors.

To secure the Russia's economic interests and to give rise to cooperation on regional level, the SCO should be made more effective. Both China and Pakistan should cooperate in getting access to the hydrocarbons to minimize the role of foreign actors like the United States. The FSCA and Afghanistan should be linked to the outside world through collective efforts. The SCO should be reorganized on the pattern of European Union to convert it into an economic bloc for closer economic cooperation.

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