PROJECT MUSE®

Putin's Predicament: Russia and Afghanistan after 2014

Mark N. Katz

Asia Policy, Number 17, January 2014, pp. 13-17 (Article)

Published by National Bureau of Asian Research

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2014.0009>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/536777>

Putin's Predicament: Russia and Afghanistan after 2014

Mark N. Katz

Russian press commentary during 2013 indicates that Moscow is fearful that the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan at the end of 2014 will only have negative implications for Russian security interests. Russian observers do not believe that Afghan government forces can effectively deal with a resurgent Taliban, do not see Afghanistan's current president (Hamid Karzai) as an effective leader, and do not believe that the 2014 Afghan presidential elections will lead to anything but political infighting that will only benefit the Taliban.

Russian commentators seem convinced that once ISAF withdraws, the Taliban will sooner or later reassert control over most (if not all) of Afghanistan. And once the Taliban does this (or even before), it will immediately act to support jihadist groups seeking to bring about the downfall of the post-Soviet Central Asian governments and replace them with radical Islamist ones that are hostile to Russia. Further, Russian commentators blame this state of affairs squarely on the United States for not having defeated the Taliban once and for all. But while some view the resurgence of the Taliban as being the result of U.S. incompetence, others believe that this is what Washington wants in order to weaken Russia.¹

So what can Moscow do to prevent these negative consequences resulting from ISAF's departure? Russian commentators are certainly not advocating that ISAF be replaced by Russian, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), or Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) forces. The negative experience of the 1979–89 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan has not been forgotten in Moscow, which does not want to repeat that experience. What Russian commentators are discussing is reintroducing a Russian military presence along the Tajik-Afghan border. But despite what

MARK N. KATZ is Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University. He can be reached at <mkatz@gmu.edu>.

¹ For a sampling of this discussion, see Yelena Chernenko, "The Situation in Afghanistan Does Not Inspire Optimism," *Kommersant*, April 25, 2013, 7, cited in *The Current Digest of the Russian Press* 65, no. 17–18 (2013): 19; Alexander Golts, "Alone Against the Taliban," *Moscow Times*, May 14, 2013 ~ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/alone-against-the-taliban/479917.html>; Sergei Kozhemyakin, "The Afghan Debacle," *Sovetskaya Rossia*, June 27, 2013, 7, cited in *The Current Digest of the Russian Press* 65, no. 26 (2013): 18–19; and "Russia Preparing for War on Its Own Territory," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, June 27, 2013, 2, cited in *The Current Digest of the Russian Press* 65, no. 26 (2013): 20.

they see as the obvious benefits of Russian protection for Tajikistan, Russian observers see its president, Emomali Rakhmon, as demanding concessions that are unacceptable to Moscow in exchange for his cooperation.² Similarly, Uzbek president Islam Karimov is seen as being suspicious that the true purpose of a Russian (or even CSTO or SCO) troop presence would not be to defend Uzbekistan against the Taliban but to overthrow him.³

Moscow, of course, will have options in post-ISAF Afghanistan (even if Russian commentators do not see them yet). Just as the Najibullah government remained in office for over three years after the completion of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the post-Karzai government may prove more resilient than is currently anticipated. If so, Russia—along with other nations—can improve the Karzai government's prospects for survival by providing it with arms and possibly advisers.

In addition, even if the United States and its Western allies completely depart from Afghanistan, there are other states in the region that share Russia's interest in preventing the Taliban from regaining control over Afghanistan or, if it does, from destabilizing neighboring countries. The Central Asian republics obviously share these interests with Russia, though their capacity to act in Afghanistan is limited. Iran and India are also opposed to the resurgence of the Taliban, and their capacities to act are far greater.

From 1996 to the U.S.-led intervention just after September 11, Iran and Russia both worked to help the Northern Alliance prevent the radical Sunni Taliban (which was hostile to Shia Iran as well as to Russia) from overrunning all Afghanistan. With the Taliban so closely allied to India's archrival Pakistan, New Delhi too was unhappy to see it come to power back in 1996. Without the ISAF presence in Afghanistan serving to protect Iranian and Indian security interests vis-à-vis the Taliban and Pakistan, both Iran and India may have a strong incentive to work with Russia against them.

Regarding China, Russian commentators are not pleased about how closely Beijing cooperates with Pakistan or with its seeming indifference to the Taliban. One article in the Russian press warning that Xinjiang is becoming China's Chechnya and that the United States supports jihadists based in Afghanistan and Central Asia who seek to weaken Chinese rule

² Vladimir Mukhin, "'Pyandzh' Plan for Russian Border Troops," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, May 20, 2013, 1, cited in *The Current Digest of the Russian Press* 65, no. 21 (2013): 12–13.

³ Golts, "Alone Against the Taliban."

in Xinjiang appeared designed to persuade Beijing to support Moscow's anti-Taliban efforts—or at the very least, to not oppose them.⁴

Moscow views Pakistan as Russia's main enemy in Afghanistan. It was Pakistan that undermined the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan during the 1980s through directly supporting the *mujahideen* as well as allowing aid from other states to reach them. It was Pakistan that successfully promoted the Taliban's rise to power in the 1990s, and thus at least indirectly enabled it to support the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as well as al Qaeda. It was Pakistan that, while supposedly helping the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan after September 11, continued to back the Taliban and thus both undermined ISAF's efforts to defeat it and threatened Russian security interests. And it is Pakistan that will once again support the Taliban's efforts to both gain power in Afghanistan and harm Russian interests after the departure of ISAF.

Standing behind Pakistan, as Moscow sees it, is Saudi Arabia—Russia's archenemy. Saudi Arabia supported the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s and the Chechen rebels in the 1990s and 2000s. More recently, Moscow has accused it of seizing on the Arab Spring that began in 2011 to support jihadists in Libya and Syria and of seeking to light the fire of jihad throughout the North Caucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and wherever else it can.⁵ There are two factors that make Saudi Arabia more dangerous than Pakistan in the Russian view: (1) whereas Pakistan is poor, Saudi Arabia is rich and thus has greater means to support jihad; and (2) whereas the Americans have woken up to Pakistan's perfidiousness, they either refuse to recognize Saudi Arabia's or are complicit in it.

This brings us back to how Russia views the U.S. role in Afghanistan after the departure of ISAF. Some Russian commentators really do seem to believe that the United States is allied with pro-jihadist forces and that it is leaving Afghanistan a mess in order to harm Russian interests. But there are others who understand that the United States is withdrawing from Afghanistan due to budgetary as well as domestic political pressures, and that Moscow and Washington have a common interest in promoting a viable government in Kabul capable of resisting the Taliban. It is these Russian pragmatists who do not want the United States to leave Afghanistan altogether but rather to leave behind a small force to bolster the government

⁴ Yury Tavrovsky, "Is Xinjiang China's Chechnya?" *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, July 11, 2013, 7, cited in *The Current Digest of the Russian Press* 65, no. 28 (2013): 20.

⁵ For more on the tense ties between Moscow and Riyadh, see Mark N. Katz, "The Impact of the Arab Spring on Saudi-Russian Relations," *ORIENT* 53, no. 4 (2012): 27–31.

in Kabul. While President Vladimir Putin's statements often seem more supportive of the former, more paranoid view, his actions indicate that he is actually pursuing the latter, more pragmatic approach.⁶

Seen from a long-term perspective, Moscow and Islamabad have been battling each other for influence over Afghanistan since the beginning of the Cold War. From an even longer-term perspective, post-Soviet Russia and the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and Pakistan, on the other, are the inheritors of the competition over Afghanistan between tsarist Russia and the British Empire dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. While the large-scale U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan since 2001 has been the United States' longest war to date, it may prove only to have been a brief interruption in the competition that both Moscow and Islamabad appear set to resume after the withdrawal of ISAF.

The United States' role in this competition has shifted over the past few decades. During the Cold War and especially during the 1979–89 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Washington backed Islamabad against Moscow. From 1989 to 2001, however, it lost interest and backed neither side. After September 11, the United States fought against Russia's enemies in Pakistan but was unable to do so effectively: Washington proved incapable of stopping Islamabad from supporting the Taliban because of the United States' dependence on Pakistan for logistical support in supplying the large U.S. and coalition military presence in Afghanistan.

For Moscow, the key questions about the Russo-Pakistani competition in Afghanistan that will soon re-emerge are: What role will the United States play? Will it side with Pakistan yet again? While this possibility may strike Americans and even Russian pragmatists as ridiculous, past U.S. support for Pakistan and deference to it during the U.S.-led intervention leads Russian pessimists (of whom there is no shortage) to fear that Washington will do so again. There are, though, two other courses of action open to U.S. foreign policy: (1) the United States may simply withdraw from Afghanistan altogether and allow neighboring countries to compete with one another, as it did from 1989 to 2001; or (2) the United States may retain a small military presence that can be sustained entirely via Russia and Central Asia and thus avoid the blunder of dependence on Pakistan.

This second course of action is naturally what Russian pragmatists hope for, since this would mean that Washington would for the first time

⁶ Michael Bohm, "Why Putin Wants U.S. Bases in Afghanistan," *Moscow Times*, May 17, 2013 ~ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/why-putin-wants-us-bases-in-afghanistan/480087.html>.

unambiguously side with Moscow in its competition with Islamabad over Afghanistan. Being pragmatists, however, they understand that Russia may have little influence over whether the United States adopts this course of action (not least because of the chronically poor state of Russian-U.S. relations). Russian support for the United States retaining a military presence in Central Asia would help achieve the common goal of protecting the Kabul government against the Taliban, but it is not clear whether pragmatism extends this far in Moscow. Finally, if the United States does withdraw altogether from Afghanistan, Russia must be prepared to act with its own regional coalition of the willing (or not so willing) to contain both the Taliban and Pakistan. ♦