

# Separately Together: U.S. and Russian Approaches to Political Settlement in Afghanistan

## **PONARS Policy Memo No. 230**

Prepared for the PONARS Policy Conference  
Washington, DC  
January 25, 2002

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*December 2001*

The sudden collapse of Taliban power in Kabul and other cities in the north of Afghanistan, followed by the liberation of most of Afghanistan from Taliban control, happened much faster than expected in the United States and occurred while the administration was still debating the idea of including Taliban “moderates” in the new Afghan coalition government. The United States had never taken the Northern Alliance too seriously and was not very enthusiastic about it controlling, although largely formally, a substantial part of Afghanistan’s territory. Fully aware of the Pashtun factor as a key to any political settlement in Afghanistan, the United States has staked much not only on the Northern Alliance—or perhaps not even mainly on them—but also on the “nonextremist” Pashtuns, including what it saw or pretended to see as the “moderate” part of the Taliban.

Against this background, the Taliban’s quiet and rapid withdrawal from Kabul made the task of searching for ways to form the new government more difficult. A prolonged siege of Kabul by Northern Alliance forces at Washington’s recommendation would perhaps have created a more favorable political scenario by leaving enough time to explore ways to form a coalition government with participation of “all interested parties,” including some of the ex-Taliban Pashtuns. In any case, United States did not sanction the Northern Alliance’s seemingly “spontaneous” decision to advance to Kabul and go further, prior to the initiation of the process of forming Afghanistan’s new government. At the same time, as a substantial part of Afghanistan’s territory suddenly fell under the formal control of the anti-Taliban coalition, U.S. bombing became increasingly problematic and the need increased dramatically for the United States to switch to limited special land operations, which are essential to achieve the main declared political goal of “getting Osama bin Laden” and physically removing his supporters in Afghanistan from the political scene. Although any political role for the Taliban as such in postconflict Afghanistan seems highly unlikely in the foreseeable future, those of the Taliban or their potential successors who would choose to resort to guerrilla warfare have a powerful ideology to build on—in that war torn country a radical Islamic centralized alternative to ethnic and tribal divisions will always have a place.

In contrast to a somewhat confused reaction on the part of the United States, the sudden developments of November 2001 have given rise to many speculations over whether and to what extent Moscow “recommended,” supported, and facilitated the rapid advance of the Northern Alliance, particularly of General Muhammad Fahim’s Tajik forces. That these developments played in the hands of Russia is little doubted. In the short term, Russia would benefit by bringing Tajik-dominated forces to power in Kabul and reducing the prospects for Taliban participation in the new Afghan government to almost nothing. In the long term, Russia could hope to benefit by moving unstable areas further from the borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) while possibly reigniting the Pashtun problem in Afghan-Pakistani relations and in Pakistan proper. In any case, radical changes in the military situation on the ground to the benefit of the United Anti-Taliban Front made Russia’s consistent opposition to any Taliban involvement in Afghanistan’s new government appear in a different light, especially given the United States’ early position that it did not exclude the participation of moderate ex-Taliban in the postwar political process.

Russia’s goal with relation to Afghanistan in the context of the U.S.-led antiterrorist operation has been trying to ensure that Afghanistan no longer becomes a hospitable refuge for terrorists of all sorts—perhaps the only fundamental interest fully shared with Washington. In line with this goal, Russia’s main interest with regards to how to shape and support the post-Taliban political settlement in Afghanistan lies in forming a wide coalition government with the strong participation of the Northern Alliance. At the same time, political and military officials in Moscow have learned at least some lessons from both the Soviet experience and the post-Soviet decade of factionalism and civil strife in Afghanistan well enough not to have any illusions about the very limited political and administrative capacities of any “united” coalition government that is doomed to play a largely nominal role in a de facto divided country. As a result, Afghanistan is likely to remain mired in limited-scale internal struggles for land and power, confined to its own territory, for a very long time – and that does not run contrary to the interests of Russia, which is still concerned about the potential for region-wide destabilization, especially in the long run.

Although the primary concern of the United States in this respect has been the shaky political situation in Pakistan, the most critical factor in Russia’s policy on Afghanistan and on cooperation with Washington is the stability of Central Asia. Russia views repercussions of both the U.S. campaign and postwar developments in Afghanistan for Central Asian states, especially those who actively supported the operation (such as Uzbekistan), with concern. If Uzbekistan faced a rather limited threat from small groups of extremists supported from Afghanistan before the U.S. campaign and even tried to build semiofficial ties with the Taliban, its direct association with the U.S. military campaign can make it a primary target for Islamic radicals. Although Uzbekistan’s participation in the U.S. counterterrorist operation was designed to ensure a certain degree of protection for Uzbek president Islam Karimov’s regime (and, among other things, has resulted in the reported death of Juma Namangani, one of the leaders of the radical Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), in the long term, by sacrificing economic and political reform in the name of antiterrorism and thus breeding more Islamic extremism, the effect may be the reverse. Russia fully realizes Uzbekistan’s concern for its own security and for keeping the secular character of its regime as a primary factor driving it closer to the United States. However, Moscow also views Tashkent’s direct support of the U.S. military campaign against the background of Karimov’s ambition to dominate the region, coupled with Uzbekistan’s strained

relations with most of its Central Asian neighbors, especially Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and its withdrawal from the CIS Collective Security Treaty.

Under these circumstances, Russia, on the one hand, tries to have a say in the postconflict political settlement in Afghanistan, having in mind the goal of preventing the postwar redistribution of power in the region—primarily by playing a balancing act with its closest regional partners Iran and Tajikistan, but also by trying to rely on the Northern Alliance—particularly on various Tajik groups. On the other hand, in the long run, Russia remains concerned about the possibility of a destabilized Afghanistan sparking conflagration in Central Asia that, if followed by the U.S. disengagement from the region, would leave Moscow almost alone with the task of cleaning up the mess, which is beyond Russia's current capabilities.

All these considerations turned Russia's general support for the U.S. limited retaliation campaign in Afghanistan into a policy that could be labeled as conditional cooperation. To name just a few of these implied rather than explicit "conditions," Russia, concerned about potential repercussions of the developments in Afghanistan for the stability of Central Asian states, made it clear from the very start of the U.S. counterterrorist campaign that it would like to have a say in the future political settlement in Afghanistan and would react calmly to the presence of U.S. forces in Uzbekistan and elsewhere in Central Asia only if concrete requirements of the military aspect of the counterterrorist operations justify this presence and it was not politically destabilizing.

Following a common goal, but guided by different strategic priorities, the United States and Russia started to divide responsibilities somewhat by choosing their own preferred clients within the Northern Alliance early in the campaign. Enjoying close support from Uzbekistan in its military campaign, the United States (joined by Turkey) focused its support for the Northern Alliance forces on General Abdul Rashid Dostum's ethnically Uzbek forces. Although providing some assistance to Dostum, Russia (joined by Iran) focused its support on ethnically Tajik forces led by General Fahim. More generally, the fact that the U.S.-Pakistan and emerging U.S.-Uzbekistan ties are partly balanced by a Russia-Iran-Tajikistan link should help ensure a postwar balance of forces that is an important factor in shaping political settlement in Afghanistan.

In the context of the U.S.-Russia interaction on Afghanistan, the seemingly monolithic Taliban movement's unexpectedly rapid disintegration, with some of its rank-and-file dispersing or joining the former opponents for the sake of physical survival (a typical practice for Afghanistan) and with others, especially foreign mercenaries, doomed to extermination or flight, removed the problem of including parts of the Taliban into the transitional government. The issue, although still debated in Pakistan, ceased to cause international tensions, particularly between the United States and Russia. For the time being, the United States and Russia, as well as most regional and local forces seem to be satisfied with a vague and inclusive formula of wide representation that, in theory, should prevent any one particular group from usurping power.

The formula of wide representation has become the basis for a political settlement that the UN tried to secure at the UN-sponsored Bonn conference on Afghanistan and by its November 14, 2001, Resolution 1378 on Afghanistan, calling for the new government of Afghanistan to be "broad-based, multi-ethnic and fully representative of all the Afghan people." It must be noted, however, that except for the presence of Zahir Shah, the ousted king in exile and a preferred political choice of both the United States and the UN, their leading figures have not represented the parties. Several voices from the ground, particularly from Kabul, which the Interim Military

Council headed by General Fahim ruled de facto and Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani de jure, were reluctant to recognize the Bonn meeting as anything more than a symbol and insisted that further negotiations take place in Afghanistan in the form of Loja Jirga, a traditional Afghan national forum. Apart from ethnic and tribal differences and the significant level of distrust between the parties, forces that compose the coalition government also have very different perspectives on Afghanistan's future, including whether the state should be centralized or diversified. Finally, some developments on the ground, such as the self-arranged election of a governor of Herat province by a local loja jirga, which may not be fully consistent with UN plans, have interesting parallels.

The talks in Bonn are just the beginning of a long and complex peace process. Moreover, whatever agreement the international community facilitates, no one can guarantee that parties on the ground will respect it, even if they officially support it. Afghanistan has a record of many nonfulfilled power-sharing agreements, including five reached after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989. With the Northern Alliance reluctant to cede power and suspicious of the continuing influx of foreign forces and a "robust" UN force, the UN's—and the United States'—strategy has been to weaken the alliance by not dealing with it as with one entity and to make promises of large-scale international support that induce the fractious Afghan groups to work together.

In this context, Russia's position has been somewhat nuanced: although publicly fully supportive of a wide representation formula and realizing the need for adequate Pashtun representation, Moscow has chosen to deal with the Northern Alliance directly as with de facto authorities in Kabul—something that has provoked U.S. warnings against what the alliance could view as an "encouragement" for solidifying power. One more thing that Russia shares with Iran and the Northern Alliance is concern over the arrival of new foreign military contingents and the nature of their mission.

These differences, however, should not be overestimated. Despite all the nuances, a more or less general regional and international agreement seems to have emerged that a relatively peaceful Afghanistan could be a loose association only (with limited prerogatives for a coalition government in Kabul) and that any postconflict arrangement for that country would be credible only if it builds on ethnic and tribal differences instead of trying to ignore them. The cementing force for even a loose association could come mainly in the form of promises of large-scale financial support—something that only the United States and other leading donors could do, both directly and through the United Nations and other international organizations. Apart from alleviating general humanitarian needs and facilitating far-reaching political goals, financial infusions should also serve the very concrete preventive purpose of effectively buying regional and tribal leaders from potential bin Ladens. Although this goal is in Russia's vital interests, in this aspect Moscow would have to rely on the United States because it has critical leverage Russia is badly short of—financial resources.