

Does Russia Want the West to Succeed in Afghanistan?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 61

Ekaterina Stepanova

Institute of World Economy and International Relations

September 2009

As in the United States, Russia's policy on Afghanistan has recently undergone an evolution of sorts, prompting speculation about Moscow's "true" motivations for engagement. Two prominent assessments of Russia's agenda in Afghanistan dominate the discussion. The first is that Moscow offers genuine, if tactical, support to the West on several issues of shared importance, such as antiterrorism and counternarcotics. The second is that Russia is operating within a familiar "zero sum" framework and tacitly hopes to see the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization fail in Afghanistan. As this memo argues, both of these perspectives are oversimplified. Neither identifies the main dilemma Russia faces: whether to prioritize its own genuine interests in Afghanistan or to use the country instrumentally as a way to improve Moscow's standing on other, not necessarily related, security issues.

Russia's Genuine Interests in Afghanistan

After a relative lack of interest in the 1990s, Russia's attention to Afghanistan and the neighboring region has increased gradually, especially since the mid-2000s. In 2008 and 2009, new nuances appeared in Russia's policy toward Afghanistan, some seemingly in conflict with others.

On the one hand, Afghanistan has been central to the latest normalization of security relations between Russia and NATO and the United States. Their rapprochement culminated in an agreement on U.S. military transit to Afghanistan through Russian territory, signed during President Barack Obama's visit to Moscow in July 2009.

On the other hand, a potential "new Afghan policy" that departs from the conventional approach has been under discussion, at a semi-official level, since early

2009. Elements of this suggested policy include developing more active ties with Pashtun groups, possibly talking with “moderate” Taliban, radically upgrading Russia’s economic relations with Afghanistan, and posing a kind of “peaceful alternative” to the “military dominance” of NATO and the United States.

Understanding these conflicting signals requires an examination of Russia’s interests in Afghanistan. Some directly relate to the country and involve Russia’s genuine, even vital, concerns, especially in terms of human security. Other interests are more instrumental and relate to Afghanistan only indirectly, if at all. While all these interests are legitimate to one degree or another, it is important to understand which ones are the main drivers of Russia’s Afghanistan policy.

Apart from limited economic interests in the reconstruction of Afghanistan’s Soviet-built industry and infrastructure and the exploration and exploitation of the country’s natural resources, Russia’s most direct, genuine interest in Afghanistan is to curb the mass outflow of illicit drugs (mainly opiates) from the country. This drug trade is a primary threat to Russia’s human and national security, comparable to more traditional security threats. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in 2006 the share of Afghan opiates passing through the Northern (“Silk”) route was less than 15 percent of the total, while more traditional routes were more heavily utilized (53 percent through Iran and 33 percent through Pakistan). The share of heroin in Russia’s opiate consumption has also marginally declined. However, illicit opiates passing through the Northern route are now destined primarily for Russia’s domestic market; only a limited share continues on to European markets. While Russia needs to reduce domestic demand and strengthen interdiction, the much larger problem lies on the supply side, given the sheer size of Afghanistan’s opium economy. In sharp contrast to an unprecedented 90 percent reduction of illicit crops in Taliban-held territory following a strictly enforced prohibition of opium cultivation in 2000, the opiate output in post-Taliban Afghanistan has surged exponentially. According to the UNODC, the area used for poppy cultivation increased by 95 percent between 2001 and 2007.

Russia cannot make any significant progress in tackling its illicit drug threat unless the opium economy in Afghanistan is significantly reduced. Russia itself has no control over the source of the problem. Thus, it is in Moscow’s best interest to support any force or arrangement in Afghanistan that will help curb or undermine the opium economy.

Russia’s Instrumental Interests in Afghanistan

In addition to its interest in combating Afghanistan’s drug trade, Russia also increasingly sees Afghanistan as a new trump card in its relations with the United States and NATO. Moscow has viewed the expanded Western presence in and around Afghanistan since 2001 as the product of both genuine security interests and the desire to establish a permanent geostrategic presence in Central Asia.

The decline in relations with the United States and NATO after the August 2008 Georgia war prompted Moscow to make Afghanistan a higher priority. Continuing disagreements on Ukraine, Iran, and plans for U.S. tactical missile deployment in Eastern Europe have underscored the urgent need for a stabilizing common interest to

counterbalance otherwise troubled Russian-Western relations.

The number of potentially unifying issues is limited, however, as they must relate to security concerns common to the United States, NATO, and Russia, as well as be politically relevant to the West. The “global war on terrorism” previously represented common ground for Russia and its Western partners. After eight years, this U.S.-led global campaign has left such a questionable legacy that the new Obama administration has made every effort to narrow the “global counterterrorist” agenda by focusing more closely on the fight against al Qaeda-inspired forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The growing imperative to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq, in conjunction with the Taliban resurgence, has also contributed to the shift of American attention back to Afghanistan. For Russia, then, there can hardly be a better candidate than Afghanistan to serve as a new common interest.

The July 2009 joint U.S.-Russia declaration on Afghanistan, and especially the intergovernmental agreement on military transit, reflects this “instrumental” Russian approach, centered on broader Russian-Western relations and pursued primarily for reasons unrelated to Afghanistan. Allowing the U.S. military to cross its territory has allowed Russia to revive its relationship with NATO, while deemphasizing disagreements in the South Caucasus and keeping NATO largely away from post-Soviet Central Asia. The increase in military transit through Russia also financially benefits certain state structures and government-affiliated corporate interests. The major downside to such an approach is that Russia’s most critical human and national security concern in Afghanistan (illicit drugs) is largely subordinate to the general logic of Russian-Western relations.

A somewhat different approach has surfaced as part of the semi-official discussions around Russia’s “new Afghan policy.” This approach first manifested itself publicly at the Russian-Afghan forum, conducted in Moscow in May 2009 at the nongovernmental level, though it was officially sanctioned and drew marked Pashtun participation. On the positive side, this approach emphasizes the gravity of the problem of illicit drugs coming from Afghanistan, the inappropriateness of military tools and forces for addressing the main security threats related to Afghanistan, and the need for more active Russian economic cooperation with Afghanistan and a greater rapprochement with Pashtun political forces. Problematically, however, it appears to grossly exaggerate Russia’s political and economic levers in Afghanistan and is too demonstratively critical of the U.S. and NATO presence in the region, which is interpreted in a rather oversimplified way as little more than a springboard for the projection of U.S. and NATO military power in Central Eurasia. It remains to be seen if these semi-official discussions will develop into a serious policy alternative, or if they will simply present a more nuanced version of the same Western-centered logic as before, a mere exercise to demonstrate Russia’s growing activity and interest in Afghanistan.

The West’s Role in Addressing Drugs and Conflict in Afghanistan

While they are far from controlling Afghanistan, the United States and the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) are presently the most powerful actors on Afghan soil. The real question, however, is whether U.S. and NATO forces can

effectively contribute to the reduction of the opium economy. Thus far, the U.S. and NATO presence appears to be of minimal, if any, assistance in solving this problem.

U.S. and NATO interests and capabilities in this field are only partly to blame. Afghan opiates do not threaten the United States directly, and Washington has never hesitated to sacrifice counternarcotics work in Afghanistan for the sake of higher priority issues in the region, such as supporting anti-Soviet *jihād* in the 1980s or antiterrorism in the 2000s. The United States does, however, finance the largest share of counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan. More recently, the Obama administration has even decided to review its counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan, moving away from forced eradication. These moves are mostly symbolic and instrumental, however; they are not signs that the United States is pursuing an intrinsically important goal. For instance, the United States' new emphasis on alternative development may have less to do with reducing the opium economy than with avoiding the further alienation of some elites and populations in advance of provincial and presidential elections by moving away from unpopular eradication measures. For its part, NATO struggles to execute counternarcotics tasks, as it does in dealing with many other "new threats." The alliance's haphazard transformation may have extended its purview beyond collective defense, but it has fallen short of transforming NATO into an effective police force or development agency. Although some alliance members, such as the United Kingdom, show genuine interest in fighting illicit drugs in Afghanistan, the willingness to get involved in counternarcotics varies from one member state to another. ISAF as a whole is simply not up to the task.

At a more fundamental level, the problem boils down to the fact that deeply embedded drug economies cannot be effectively undermined by external forces. In the few cases where an opium economy has been reduced (Maoist China, Myanmar since the mid-1990s, and Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in 2000-2001), it was the result of actions by functional national authorities, not external actors. The general functionality of the state is more critical in addressing the conflict-drugs nexus than is a country's political system or the scale of foreign counternarcotics assistance.

To address the threat of illicit drugs, it is, therefore, in Moscow's *vital* national and human security interest to support the creation of functional authorities in Afghanistan, especially in those regions most heavily affected by drugs and conflict. This is a task that the United States and NATO have sought to undertake in their own way, but one in which they have yet to succeed. Their attempts to bolster Afghanistan's weak central government in accordance with externally-driven state-building agendas may have even had an unintended, counterproductive effect on the functionality of governance in Afghanistan. Above all, functionality is undermined by the continuing armed confrontation with the resurgent Islamist Pashtun-dominated Taliban.

The ultimate question is how to significantly improve the functionality of governance throughout Afghanistan, especially in major drug-producing and conflict-torn regions, *under existing conditions*. These include continuing fragmentation of politics, economics, and governance; overdependence of the national government on foreign support; the ambiguous position of key former mujahedeen leaders and forces who avoid full rapprochement with Afghanistan's

pro-Western government but at the same time distance themselves from the violent Islamist opposition; and the armed confrontation with the Taliban, which de facto controls much of the country's southeast, central to Afghanistan's opium economy.

The reality is that neither hard nor soft counternarcotics measures are likely to be effective when drug production is intertwined with an ongoing armed conflict. The problem is not only the use of illicit drugs as a source of funding by armed opposition (which, in turn, shelters drug cultivation and production), or the frequent involvement of state officials in drug-related corruption. More importantly, the ongoing armed confrontation also prevents the establishment of functional governance in drug-producing areas, a *sine qua non* for any serious progress toward reducing illicit crops and drug production.

This has two important implications. First, while the dual problem of drugs and conflict requires an integrated solution, "integrated" does not mean "simultaneous." The interrelated tasks of conflict management and the reduction of illicit drug production can be carried out successfully in the same area, but only if they are tackled one after another. At the earlier stages of the transition to peace, counternarcotics should be subordinated to the achievement of durable ceasefires and basic stability, both of which are necessary to ensure functional governance and a non-confrontational local population.

Second, functional governance in Afghanistan will not be achieved merely by upgrading external assistance or further centralizing the existing government. It requires a combination of some kind of representative national government and functional authorities at the regional and local levels, especially in the Pashtun-populated southeast. It is highly unlikely that such functional local and regional authorities can be established in the middle of an ongoing armed confrontation with the largest and most powerful Pashtun forces – the Taliban.

Conclusion

At present, Russia's policy on Afghanistan remains largely an extension of its NATO and U.S. policy. Even the semi-official discussions about the "new Afghan policy" have not been free from this inferiority complex. For Russia, however, NATO's role in Afghanistan should be assessed based on the extent to which the United States and NATO can contribute to addressing Russia's most significant concern vis-à-vis Afghanistan – the reduction of the opium economy.

The continuation of armed conflict in Afghanistan is not in Russia's interest as it prevents the establishment of functional governance in the main drug-producing regions, without which no counternarcotics measures can be effective. Consequently, Russia should support any real efforts at peace-building in Afghanistan, regardless of who is spearheading them and the political and religious orientation of the potential parties involved.

Whether support for expanded U.S. and NATO military transit will contribute to peace and functional governance in Afghanistan, especially in the most problematic drug-producing and conflict-affected regions, remains an open question. The United

States, NATO, and the Afghan government have failed to curb the Taliban insurgency and have only had a marginal effect on the dynamics of the illicit drug economy. The U.S. and NATO presence, however, will persist. At the same time, the Taliban has repeatedly refused to enter into a formal peace process as long as foreign troops remain in the country. The imperfect, but practical, solution may be to recognize de facto the Taliban's role in the southeast, on the condition that they increase counternarcotics efforts. If Moscow is genuinely interested in addressing the narcotics issue, it should be prepared to support this or other unorthodox options.

Above all, Russia's policymakers should realize that the threat to Russia's human security posed by the mass flow of illicit opiates from Afghanistan is no less important, and possibly even more, than the "success" or "failure" of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan.

PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York.