

Russian-Iranian cooperation for Afghan crisis settlement

Report by PolitContact Political Technologies Centre director at the Russian-Iranian Cooperation in the Interest of Establishing a New Regional Security System roundtable discussion

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The current and potential threats pertinent to Afghanistan continue to pose a considerable problem to the whole of international community. However, they present the greatest danger to the states adjacent to Afghanistan. The politico-military instability, which has persisted in the country for many years, facilitates a higher activity of radical forces threatening domestic tranquillity and public peace in the neighbouring states.

Therefore, the powers that are interested in preserving peace and stability in the region strive to stop the aggravation of the Afghan crisis. To many of them, the participation in the Afghan conflict settlement is a way to enhance their own geopolitical significance and increase their influence both in and outside of the region.

In the short and medium terms, Russia is unlikely to encounter a military threat emanating immediately from Afghanistan. However, Russia's security is clearly threatened by the stream of drugs flowing in from Afghanistan via Central Asian countries and Kazakhstan. Another serious risk is Afghanistan's turning into a safe haven for various militants and terrorists focused on fighting Russia and in Russia.

In addition, the situation in Afghanistan will affect Russia's security indirectly, via the Central Asian countries in the first place. In case of further destabilisation of Afghanistan, the countries could be flooded with refugees and could turn into a Islamic extremism breeding ground, while their internal destabilisation will contribute to a further growth of drug trafficking and cross-border crime.

Although Russia lacks clear-cut economic interests in Afghanistan now, it will be ready to get immediately involved into the rebuilding of Afghan economy within the framework of international assistance to Kabul, if the situation stabilises. One should hardly count, however, on Russia's willingness to rebuild Afghanistan at its own expense in the near to medium term.

It would be more realistic to expect that in the near future, Moscow will try to pursue its diplomatic policies vis-à-vis Afghanistan via the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and via bilateral or multilateral relations with the regional powers – China, India, Iran and Pakistan – and with its partners in integration programmes – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. If need be, it can do so via its relations with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan that might make such a request in case of a considerable aggravation of the situation on their borders with Afghanistan.

It should be taken into consideration that the power struggle in Afghanistan, which is being pursued, to a large extent, in the form of ethnic confrontation, can draw Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to Afghanistan's domestic

conflict, with the two countries to try and influence Russia's Afghan policy in a way favouring them. Russia does its best not to interfere into the domestic affairs of Afghanistan and, therefore, will oppose attempts of other states, including its CSTO allies, to draw it into the domestic confrontation in Afghanistan.

Therefore, Russia is interested in close cooperation with states interested in maintaining stability in the Central Asian countries and in reducing the degree of the ethnic tension in Afghanistan. From this point of view, the cooperation of Russia and Iran in this field seems to be extremely promising, with Iran being able to be drawn into the domestic Afghan ethnic conflict.

In addition, Russia will continue to maintain the existing links with all significant Afghan political forces and neighbouring countries and will do its best to be abreast of the situation, Moscow needs this to stand or its economic and foreign policy interests effectively (e.g. to sell combat gear to Afghanistan).

The Afghan crisis will affect in the gravest manner the situation in Pakistan, to which the Afghan conflict remains its primary national security threat. This is due, in the first place, to the Pashto tribes residing on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border (Durand Line) that is a bone of bitter content to Islamabad and Kabul in itself.

Pakistan also remains a close ally of China and a long-time rival of India. In recent years, Pakistani officials have alleged that the Russian-Pakistani relations are a story of missed opportunities, while Pakistani experts have maintained that in Pakistan there is the consensus on deepening the relations with Russia and recognising its legitimacy and its part being played in maintaining stability in the region. They have stressed that the cooperation between the two nations would facilitate the understanding of Afghanistan's internal conflicts, in particular, finding out the tangle of contradictions. Also of interest are a number of statements, particularly, the one by Maj.-Gen. Amer Riaz, the personal representative of the Pakistani Army commander in Moscow: "Of course, we recognise the part being played by Russia, China and Iran in maintaining peace in Afghanistan after 2014, since instability there would affect us even more than the United States and the West" (03 April 2013, 'Afghanistan after 2014: Probable Scenarios of Regional Situation and Russia's Strategy' conference, Russian Institute for Strategic Studies).

China considers Afghanistan through the lenses of economic interests as well as security interests and its own far-reaching Central and South Asia geopolitical plans. Interested in Afghanistan economically, China pretends to distance itself from active political involvement in the Afghan affairs, displaying willingness to deal with any regime in Kabul.

India, while expanding its presence in Afghanistan, strives to gain the status of a great Asian power, trying to hold Pakistan and China back on the Afghan approach at the same time.

In this connection, the position of Iran seems to be the most similar one to Russia's Afghan strategy, for Iran regards the persistence (and possible aggravation) of the Afghan conflict as a national security threat and does not try to use it to deter its rivals.

Afghanistan is linguistically, culturally and religiously close to Iran. The latter tries to help Afghanistan to ensure its own security with the use of its own resources, because it is difficult enough for Iran to accept Afghan refugees,

whose number totals 3 million at various times. Iran is rather interested in having Afghan narcotics production, which poses immediate threat to Russia, curtailed.

Iran prefers pursuing its interests via Hazara and Tajiks, who are close to it, mostly through promotion of commerce and infrastructural investment, including investment into the construction of motorways, railways and bridges, provision of electric power, technical services and personnel training. Tehran insists on the complete withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan, favours possible partnership with India in Afghanistan and, at the same time, has problems with Pakistan that claims leadership in Afghanistan.

Thus, the interests of Iran and Russia coincide in terms of a number of key matters, e.g. military-political stabilisation of Afghanistan, final pullout of the US troops or commitment of foreign military forces only under a UN Security Council mandate, combating of drug production and trafficking.

Mention should be made that Russia and Iran are potential partners to India in Afghanistan against the backdrop of the reduction in the US forces deployed there. This should be taken into consideration both in selecting a form of the Russian-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan and in exercising their coordinated cooperation with third parties to reduce tension in Afghanistan and preserve stability in Central Asian states.

A settlement of the Afghan crisis has been hampered by Afghanistan's lack of effective state and political institutions capable of effective management of the country and of making the ethnic groups in Afghanistan to achieve compromise.

The 2014 presidential election did not contribute much to Afghanistan's statehood and did not resolve the problem of power in the country, becoming just another phase of the ongoing power struggle. Apparently, Afghanistan's internal antagonisms have become even bitterer, which leads to radicalisation of the political forces and an increase in the influence enjoyed by radical groups in neighbouring countries.

Although the political and military-political struggle is unlikely to spill over Afghanistan's border in the near future, further destabilisation in the country is bound to lead to the stirring-up of radical groups focused on Central Asia and Kazakhstan, e.g. the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

In this connection, it seems to be necessary to set up a Russian-Iranian expert organisation to work out recommendations for countering radical forces operating in the region and for support of Afghan political parties operating under patriotic slogans and standing for a peaceful settlement of the Afghan conflict and a just distribution of power among representatives of various regions and ethnic groups in Afghanistan.

It seems to me that a most important objective of such an expert group – along with seeking for ways to effectively deal with actual threats – should be the exposure of sham threats used by outside forces to divide Afghan society and escalate the Afghan conflict.

Let me offer my personal point of view as for the 'threat of Taliban' in Afghanistan. To my mind, before threats are assessed, the expert community has to make up its mind on what Taliban is. In a broad context, the way the word is used nowadays, it has turned into an 'Internet meme', a tool of information warfare.

Actually, the notion 'Taliban' has united a complex socio-political group characterised by various groups and contradictions.

I hold the viewpoint that the 'Taliban threat' should not be blown out of proportion because, firstly, Taliban's influence and ability to seize and retain power in Afghanistan are not as great as many believe, and, secondly, because Taliban itself are a complex socio-political group characterised by various groups and contradictions.

I have read recently a PhD thesis of Kazakhstan's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Tajikistan Agybai D. Smagulov, who had been the Kazakh ambassador to the Islamic State of Afghanistan for six years (2005-11). Among other interesting materials in the thesis, the latter contains (re: p. 54) an opinion of the then Afghan ambassador to the United States, Said Jawad, as for dividing Taliban into three different ideological groups. The opinion seems so interesting to me that I would like to quote it in full:

"The first group linked with al-Qa'eda and international terrorist organisations. In political terms, it consists of three networks: talibs headed by the Quetta City Council in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, chaired by mullah Omar; talibs reporting to the Miram Shah City Council in the Pakistani province of Waziristan, led by Sirajuddin Haqqani; and a group that is a member of the network of the Islamic Party of Afghanistan led by Gulbeddin Hekmatyar".

Said Jawad also notes that the links of al-Qa'eda, mullah Omar, S. Haqqani and G. Hekmatyar "date back a while, as far back as the fighting against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan and are strengthened by means of intermarriage".

"This category will not agree on any talks or reconciliation. They will not stop until they have attained their objectives, until the foreign troops have left Afghanistan. Therefore, they must be destroyed by brutal force.

"The second group consists of medium-level warlords bribed and recruited by narcomafia or foreign intelligence agencies; Afghans who oppose the presence of foreign troops in the country or who have suffered from the new Afghan authorities. The group can be pacified through dialogue, bribes or coercion.

"The third and largest group is made up of numerous rank-and-file fighters – mostly illiterate jobless brainwashed young Afghans paid up to \$300 per month and promised fat rewards in the future. These need not so much talking as an opportunity to get a job or to study, a hope for a better alternative".

In this connection, I would like to re-emphasise that the only way to resolve the Afghan conflict is to create the conditions for compromise among the conflict participants capable of abandoning armed confrontation and switch over to building governmental institutions, while taking into account the requirements and interests of various ethnic groups.

Obviously, a resolution of the problem will be feasible only if the countries playing an important part in Afghanistan (China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and Russia in the first place) realise their responsibility for the success of the Afghan peace process and maintenance of stability in the countries of Central Asia.

It is advisable that first Iran and Russia (possibly, together with Kazakhstan as part of the Moscow-Astana privileged partnership within the framework of

CSTO) devise a bilateral approach to the resolution of the Afghan problem. With this done, India could join them, and only at the next stage the three could come out with a set of specific proposals to China and Pakistan for joint steps to be taken, while, at the same time, continuing to participate in the regional cooperation to provide assistance to Afghanistan on the part of Central Asian countries.

Initially, it would be more efficient to hold bilateral Russian-Iranian expert and intergovernmental consultations about possible joint actions. This meeting is being held to this end today, by the way.

The pluses of such an approach are as follows:

- The two states enjoy a huge bilateral cooperation potential that has been far from being used to capacity.
- Iran occupies a most important military-strategic position, being a Middle East, Caucasus, Central Asian and Caspian states at the same time. All sore spots of the regions are linked with Iran one way or another. Therefore, most of the states' seemingly domestic problems could be resolved effectively only with assistance on the part of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- Iran is important to Russia as a regional partner in the first place, especially in countering the US penetration into Central Asia, the Caucasus and Middle East and Persian Gulf as well.
- Russia and Iran realise full well that the United States and NATO, using the pretext of the fight against terrorism, have created in Afghanistan a beachhead for deploying a formidable force. Especial concern is due to the establishment of a large military base near Mazar-e-Sharif. Among other things, the base is linked with the city of Termez, Uzbekistan, by rail, which affords the United States direct military access to Central Asia. The military bases in Kabul, Bagram, Kandahar and Helmand have numerous surface and underground installations fitted with air and space surveillance systems and capable of keeping an eye on the airspace of virtually all of Eurasia. Any deterioration of the situation in Central Asia could serve the grounds for NATO's military intervention, using scenarios honed in North Africa and the Middle East.
- Iran is turning into an increasingly important Central Asian powerhouse. Possibly, in the near future, Iran's SCO membership will be able to facilitate Russian-Iranian rapprochement and offer new prospects of joint efforts to reach an Afghan settlement.

In this connection, I would like to remind you that, according to a number of experts, the Islamic Republic of Iran could take interest in the Customs Union and Eurasian Union. Participation in these large-scale projects can cause the multiplicative effect, i.e. expand Iran's presence in regional commerce and give its industry a shot in the arm.

However, irrespective of the form the Russian-Iranian cooperation in the Afghan problem resolution and Russian-Iranian interaction in other spheres, including the energy sphere, may take, it is necessary that we have an opportunity to learn more about each other. Unfortunately, even the expert quarters of the two countries are poorly informed of the geopolitical objectives and short-term plans of their potential partner. Often, Russian experts lacking command of Farsi, have to learn of Iran's foreign policy projects from the Western media.

In this connection, for experts to cooperate, it is necessary to establish a Russian-Iranian information centre that would translate the most important materials, including analytical articles, dedicated to the foreign policies of the two countries into Russian and Farsi, offering them to the major Russian and Iranian media for publication. The centre also could arrange the meetings of Iranian and Russian experts who should get an opportunity to convey their views to the public.

I am ready to discuss specific proposals and ideas of joint projects that we can pursue together in the field of public diplomacy.

Thank you.

Sources:

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