

Beyond the Afghan Trauma: Russia's Return to Afghanistan

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RUSSIA'S RETURN TO
AFGHANISTAN**



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Beyond the Afghan Trauma: Russia's Return to Afghanistan

Marlène Laruelle

Executive Summary

As the United States prepares to implement a new political and military strategy for Afghanistan, the complexity of the Afghan domestic and international situation is coming into full view. American repositioning, the change of administration at the White House, and the difficulties of managing Islamabad provide a unique opening for the neighboring regional powers—Iran, India, China, and Russia—to shift the dynamics of the Afghan “Great Game”. The Afghan government’s desire to diversify its international interlocutors intensifies this situation. Since 2002, the partnership with the U.S. and the members of the coalition has dominated Afghan politics. Today, however, Kabul wishes to free itself of western pressure by turning towards other players. In particular, Russia seems to have taken on renewed importance, not to mention China and India.

The Russian stance on the Afghan question is currently the source of wide-ranging and contradictory discussions. Even Russian leaders themselves are extremely divided about the right position to take as Moscow increasingly concerns itself with the Afghan question. Russia cannot allow NATO to win and establish itself between Russia, China, India, and Iran, since this would strongly influence regional relations; but neither can Russia remain indifferent to the possibility of the coalition’s failure, since this would oblige Moscow and its neighbors to pick up where the U.S. left off to contain potential destabilization spiraling out from Afghanistan. Regardless of what happens, Russia will have to play a more active role. This is a high stakes situation for Moscow and involves issues of both domestic politics and foreign affairs.

On the international level, Russia sees the situation in Afghanistan as an opportunity to negotiate with NATO as an equal by presenting itself as a key transit point into Afghan territory from the north. This is probably the Kremlin’s primary goal, since it resents the lack of recognition it receives from the West. In foreign policy terms, Russia wants to involve itself more in Afghanistan. It also hopes, in the long term, not to lose its foothold in this strategic zone where China and India are vying to establish themselves, and that Iran regards as its backyard. But Moscow also wants to reinforce its control over the Central Asian states—

putting them in a vice by developing partnerships directly with Kabul— and to give new dimensions to the Collective Security Organization Treaty (CSO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The weakness of the Central Asian states that border Afghanistan must be one of Russia's main concerns: were the Afghan crisis to spiral out of control, Moscow would be doomed to a direct confrontation with new elements of destabilization that could put the regime at risk as far away as the Caucasus.

The Russian economic stake in Afghanistan is still modest, although it is showing signs of growth. In 2008, Russian-Afghan trade rapidly increased to over \$190 million, or 2.8 times greater than the previous year's figure, due to debt cancellation and Russia's voluntarism designed to establish itself in Afghanistan. Russia's economic involvement in Afghanistan furthers its long-term interests by strengthening its underlying economic strategy in Central Asia, enabling it to increase its access to the southern oceans, allowing it to better position itself for future competition with China, or even Iran and India. The May 14, 2009 Russian-Afghan forum, the first of its kind, is confirmation of Moscow's desire to involve itself in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is also a domestic issue for Russia, indirectly highlighting its profound social and ideological evolutions; often in the history of Russia, engagement in Central Asia becomes a means for Russia to stand up to the West. The Afghan question re-opens the wound of the 1979-1989 Soviet intervention. Russia marks the twentieth anniversary of its withdrawal from Afghanistan this year, but already the Afghan trauma that once so deeply marked Russian public opinion is changing: the younger generations did not experience it, and the older generations oscillate between indifference, oblivion, and a desire to get over the trauma by re-engaging in the region.

Regardless of the success of Russia's strategy in Afghanistan, it seems to have opened a new page in the history of Russian-Afghan relations, ending Moscow's twenty-year absence from the Afghan scene. The reconciling of institutionalized memory vis-à-vis the Soviet past is in itself favorable to a return to influence in Afghanistan. There remain, however, strong xenophobic tendencies among Russians towards people in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Afghanistan. Some Russian lobbies seem to be preparing to support renewed activism in Afghanistan,

but the Kremlin's ability to co-opt the Afghan elite remains to be seen. No long-term vying for influence is possible in this country without reliable allies.

Key Findings

- Moscow is focusing increasingly on Afghanistan. It cannot allow NATO to win and establish itself between Russia, China, India, and Iran; but neither can it remain indifferent to the possibility of the coalition failing. Regardless of the scenario that plays out, Russia will have to take a more active stance.
- Russian authorities have continually criticized NATO's political and strategic decisions in Afghanistan. At the same time, though, many Russian politicians recognize that the coalition's failure to stabilize Afghanistan would place Russia in great danger.
- Moscow is angling to take advantage of the difficulties that NATO troops and the American leadership are facing in Afghanistan to reassert its role in a region that it considers part of its sphere of influence. Russia hopes to re-negotiate its partnership with the U.S. on a more "equal" basis.
- Russia prefers bilateral talks with the U.S. to negotiate its engagement in Afghanistan. Its ultimate goal is to prevent direct negotiations between NATO and the Central Asian states and to compel Washington to get Moscow's approval prior to any new settlement in the region.
- Moscow hopes to augment the role and visibility of both the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) by presenting them as essential players in any settlement of the Afghan question.
- In 2008 Russian-Afghan trade rapidly increased to over \$190 million, or 2.8 times more than the preceding year's \$68 million, due to debt cancellation and Russia's voluntarism designed to establish itself in Afghanistan. Moscow views Afghanistan as a potential market for Russian products but also as a supplier of raw materials.

- The Russian and Afghan authorities regularly point to the years of Soviet-Afghan cooperation preceding the 1979-89 conflict as a model for the type of cooperation Russia is currently proposing. Moscow is hoping that the memory of the Soviet-Afghan war has been clouded by two decades of civil war and foreign intervention.
- Russia's current "return" to Afghanistan includes the participation of many former Soviet soldiers who served in Afghanistan. For example, *boevoe bratstvo* members have visited Kabul to develop contacts, to serve as intermediaries for Russian businessmen, and to manage humanitarian assistance programs.
- To carry out its re-entry policies, Russia is seeking to revitalize Russophile lobbies in Afghanistan, especially politicians of communist sensibilities and the Northern Alliance, but also some Pashtun groups.
- This new activism is particularly pronounced in nationalist circles, advocating an innovative Russia that is active both in the post-Soviet space and among its former Eastern Bloc allies. The recent multiplication of Afghanistan study centers in Russia confirms the revival of the Afghan question in Russian geopolitical thinking.

Beyond the Afghan Trauma: Russia's Return to Afghanistan

As the United States prepares to implement a new political and military strategy for Afghanistan, the complexity of the Afghan domestic and international situation is coming into full view. On the domestic front, campaigning for the upcoming August 2009 presidential elections is spawning a profusion of corruption accusations against President Hamid Karzai. At the same time, Karzai is trying to reinforce his power by threatening to leave the country in a political vacuum. The Afghan government is sharpening its criticisms against the international coalition, which has been unable to curb opium production or to liquidate the Taliban insurgents despite being in the country for seven years. On the external front, American repositioning, the change of administration at the White House, and the difficulties of managing Islamabad provide a unique opening for the neighboring regional powers—Iran, India, China, and Russia—to change the dynamics of this “Great Game”. All are trying to avoid exclusion from the opportunities created by the anticipated revival of the Afghan state and the reinforcement of the American presence in the region. They are also jostling for position amongst themselves: India and China are rivals for long-term influence in Afghanistan, Iran would like to take advantage of Afghanistan as a way back into the regional game, and Russia does not intend to remain outside of decision-making processes. The Afghan government’s wish to diversify its international interlocutors intensifies this situation. The partnership with the U.S. and the members of the coalition has dominated Afghan politics since 2002, but today Kabul wants to free itself of western pressure by turning towards other players. Among them, Russia’s place seems to have grown, not to mention that of China and India.

In Russia, too, interest in Afghanistan continues to grow. The Russian stance on the Afghan question is currently provoking wide-ranging and sometimes contradictory discussions. Few western experts, however, have attempted to analyse this question and the multiplicity of issues, both domestic and foreign, confronting Russia. It seems that even Russian leaders themselves are extremely divided about what position to take. Some quietly hope that NATO fails, thereby legitimizing the failure of the Russian intervention twenty years ago, and preventing an international success that would reflect well on the U.S. and legitimize its role in the heart of Eurasia. Others, on the contrary, are worried about the possibility of the coalition’s failure, which would further destabilize Central Asia and Russia, fueling the rise of drug trafficking and Islamist movements. In both cases, Moscow

is increasingly concerned with Afghanistan: it cannot allow NATO to win and establish itself between Russia, China, India, and Iran, since this would give the North Atlantic Alliance too great a role in this region; but neither can it remain indifferent to the possibility of the coalition failing, since this would shift the burden of stabilizing Afghanistan to Russia and its neighbors. Regardless of the scenario that plays out, Russia will have to take a more active stance.

The situation therefore involves high-stakes issues for Russia's domestic politics and foreign relations. On the international level, Russia sees the Afghan question as an opportunity to negotiate with NATO as an equal by offering itself as a key transit point into Afghan territory via the north. This is probably the Kremlin's primary aim, given that it resents the lack of recognition it receives from the West. But Moscow also wants to reinforce its control over the Central Asian states—to put them in a vice by developing direct partnerships with Kabul—and to give the CSTO and the SCO new dimensions. Russia's economic stake in Afghanistan—although modest—has great potential because it strengthens Russia's underlying economic strategy in Central Asia, enables it to broaden its access to southern oceans, and allows it to better position itself for future competition with China, or indeed Iran and India. On the domestic level, the Afghan question re-opens the wounds of the 1979-89 Soviet intervention. Russia marks the twentieth anniversary of its withdrawal from Afghanistan this year, and already the Afghan trauma that once so deeply marked Russian public opinion is changing. The younger generations did not experience it, and the older generations oscillate between indifference, oblivion, and a desire to get over the trauma by re-engaging in the region. Regardless of the success of the Russian strategy in Afghanistan, it seems to have opened a new page in the history of Russian-Afghan relations, ending Moscow's twenty-year hiatus from the Afghan scene.

Russia's Multi-Faceted Geopolitical Objectives in Afghanistan

From the start of the western coalition's operations in Afghanistan, Russian leaders have continually criticized its political and strategic decisions. Since 2006-2007, Moscow has criticized NATO on four counts: first, the refusal of the pro-American government in Kabul to consider the interests of the country's northern regions; second, NATO's inability to stop poppy production; third, its inability to treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as an integrated theater of operations; and fourth, its

destructive military attacks that result in high numbers of civilian casualties and lead to a backlash of public opinion against the “occupier”. At the same time, many Russian politicians recognize that the coalition’s failure would place Russia in great danger. Dmitri Rogozin, Russia’s NATO Ambassador and a public figure famous for his anti-western positions, but also for his fear of the Caucasus and Central Asia, has indicated that a NATO defeat would be a catastrophe for Russia. However, surmising that the U.S. is not going to be able to finish its work, he encourages Russia to prepare, along with its Central Asian neighbors, to deal with the Afghan “cancer”.¹ Barack Obama’s stated hope, that the U.S. leaves Afghanistan within the next decade, is a reassurance for Russia. But it also foreshadows the possibility that Moscow will have to manage a still-unstable Afghan situation, without the help of an international coalition. Additionally, the regular presence among the Taliban groups of Jihadists from Chechnya, Dagestan, and Central Asia naturally encourages Moscow to keep an eye on the evolution of the Afghan situation.

Despite intrinsic ambiguities, Moscow is seeking to take advantage of the difficulties that NATO troops and the American leadership are facing to reassert its role in a region that it sees as part of its sphere of influence. Russia hopes above all to re-negotiate its partnership with the U.S. along lines that it considers more equal. NATO cannot withstand indefinitely attacks on its equipment that has to transit through Pakistan and the tribal zones of Peshawar. It must now turn to the post-Soviet space to gain access to a northern route into Afghan territory. NATO’s weakness in Afghanistan also allows Moscow to strengthen its relations with the Central Asian states. Russia is concerned by the modest, but regular, inroads of the U.S. in the Caspian region. The American presence in Georgia and Azerbaijan could quickly develop into a route for the delivery of material to the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, first by linking up the Caspian ports of Azerbaijan with those of Kazakhstan, then by traversing Uzbekistan, whose authorities have been trying to strengthen their ties with Washington since 2008. The U.S. is, in fact, studying two routes: Lithuania-Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan and Poti-Baku-Aktau-Uzbekistan. These paths could, however, be reversed from East to West into an export trade route that skirts Russia.

¹ Dmitri Rogozin, “America’s failure in Afghanistan will create a bigger threat to neighbouring countries,” February 4, 2009, <http://natomission.ru/en/security/article/security/artnews/34/>.

Moscow is also concerned by the possibility of a geopolitical turnaround in Tashkent; hence Dmitri Medvedev's insistence on the Russo-Uzbek strategic partnership, particularly concerning Afghanistan, during his visit to Uzbekistan at the end of January 2009. In 2008, the Uzbek authorities proposed to revive the 6+2 contact group² that initiated negotiations with Afghan forces—both the Northern Alliance and the Taliban—between 1997 and 1999, and invited NATO to make a 6+3 group.³ For now, the Uzbek proposal has not received the attention of the great powers: the U.S. remains wary of any configuration, however informal, in which NATO decisions would be subject to the approval of Moscow and Tehran. Russia prefers to negotiate its engagement in Afghanistan with the U.S. bilaterally. Its ultimate goal is to prevent any direct negotiations from taking place between NATO and the Central Asian states, and to compel Washington to request Moscow's assent prior to any new settlement in the region. In February 2009, Bishkek's announcement concerning the closure of the Manas base let it be supposed that Central Asian collaboration with the U.S. is not forbidden, but must be arranged so that it passes through the Kremlin. Even so, Kurmanbek Bakiev's government successfully played a double game, obtaining both Russian financing (or at least the promise of it) and new negotiations with Washington. According to the new agreement, Kyrgyzstan will receive \$60 million dollars in annual rent from the U.S. government in exchange for Manas's becoming a transit point for cargo to Afghanistan.⁴

In April 2008, Russia offered to allow non-military NATO material (food, medical supplies, and building materials) to transit through its territory. At the same time, Islam Karimov put forward a proposal for a NATO transit corridor across Uzbekistan, through the extension of the German-Uzbek agreement for the use of the military base at Termez on the Afghan border. However, there have long been discrepancies in the information available on this matter: in February 2009, the Russian Foreign Affairs Minister, Sergei Lavrov, stated that this transit has not yet begun while Dmitri Rogozin announced the opposite. Also in April 2009,

² This group united the six countries bordering Afghanistan (Iran, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) as well as Russia and the U.S.

³ Roy Allison, "Security Cooperation between Western States and Russia over Central Asia/Afghanistan: The Changing Role of Uzbekistan," London: Chatham House, November 24, 2008, http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/12767_241108_rep_allison.pdf.

⁴ Erica Marat, "Bakiev Wins New Geopolitical Game Over Manas Base", *Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst*, July 1, 2009, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5137>.

Tajikistan allowed the transit of NATO non-military cargo to Afghanistan by land,⁵ and, in April, the U.S. and Uzbekistan signed an agreement on the transit of non-lethal supplies to Afghanistan via rail, road and air (through the Navoi airport).⁶ The Kremlin has a key interest in accepting this transit, since it hopes to turn the balance in its favor: on the geo-strategic level, the final goal is to negotiate an end to the installation of American missiles in Poland and the Czech Republic, and to curb America's desire for Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO. On the economic level, it should be remembered that NATO operations in Afghanistan, and to a lesser extent in Iraq and Africa, saved Russian and Ukrainian civil aviation companies, which rent out cargo and personnel on a large scale to NATO and function in large part thanks to the transit of material bound for NATO troops.⁷

Lastly, Moscow hopes to augment the role and visibility of both the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) by presenting them as essential players for any settlement of the Afghan question. Russia has continued to multiply its initiatives towards Kabul within the CSTO framework. The notion of a "zone of responsibility" under CSTO control, proposed in 2005,⁸ potentially includes Afghanistan. Washington therefore perceives this as an expansion of Russia's sphere of influence. Moscow's desire to create a CSTO peace-keeping force, an idea launched in 2007 and then again in 2009, with the upgrading of the Rapid Reaction Force to 15,000 men to help in the fight against drug-trafficking and Islamist movements, heralds the birth of peace-keeping forces to rival those of NATO. Finally, the CSTO does not conceal its interest in developing direct relations with Afghanistan. This included the creation of a CSTO-Afghanistan working group to coordinate anti-drug measures in 2005, which meets biannually, the visit of a CSTO delegation to Kabul in March 2007, the hinting at possible Russian assistance to the Afghan army, and the extension of Russian military air cover to the members of the CSTO or associates who ask for

⁵ "Tajikistan allows NATO cargo transit to Afghanistan," *Reuters*, February 20, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/newsMaps/idUSTRE51J1DE20090220>.

⁶ "Uzbekistan announces air transit for NATO Afghan operations," *Defense Talk*, May 13, 2009, <http://www.defencetalk.com/air-transit-for-nato-afghan-operations-18800/>.

⁷ I thank Karl Harbo, Senior Fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy and former Head of the Delegation of the European Commission to Afghanistan, for having conveyed me this important piece of information.

⁸ Vladimir Socor, "From CIS to CSTO: Can a 'Core' be Preserved?," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 2, no. 125, June 28, 2005, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=30584.

it.⁹ Nikolai Bordiuzha, the organization's General Secretary, has nevertheless recognized that, in practice, cooperation in training Afghan power structures and in the fight against drug trafficking poses difficulties since Kabul gives preference to bilateral partnerships with the countries of the former USSR and not to multilateral ones within the CSTO framework.¹⁰

Russia is employing a similar strategy with the SCO. It wants the Organization to be more actively involved not only in Afghanistan. China also wants to be more involved, since it has become a new target for Afghan drug networks and is concerned about the lack of security for Chinese workers in Afghanistan who are murdered regularly. The organization's strength is that it includes, either as fully-fledged or associate members, all the states bordering Afghanistan (except Turkmenistan), as well as China, whose economic engagement in the country is more and more substantial. The first SCO-Afghanistan contact group formed in 2004 and was institutionalized in 2005. This is the only group of this nature that has been created by the SCO. In 2006, Hamid Karzai declared that Afghanistan "belongs to the region where the SCO also lies. Afghanistan has no other ways, and can't be outside the region."¹¹ Karzai has continuously encouraged the SCO member states to play a role in Afghanistan. In 2007, the Afghan vice-president, Ahmad Zia Masood, also stated his desire for increased cooperation with the organization, particularly in economic affairs and in reconstruction.¹² Pakistan, as much as India, also supports the idea that Russia should have a far greater presence in Afghanistan: Pervez Musharraf acknowledged in 2008 that the SCO may join the NATO forces in Afghanistan¹³ and India recently did the same. Both also called for

⁹ Vladimir Socor, "Russia Returning to Afghanistan With Not-So-Soft Power," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 53, March 16, 2007, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=32598.

¹⁰ Interview with Nikolai Bordiuzha, "ODKB gotova k sotrudnichestvu s Afganistanom" [The CSTO is ready to cooperate with Afghanistan], *Afghanistan.ru*, November 19, 2008, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/13412.html>.

¹¹ Amin Tarzi, "Afghan Leader Talks About China Ties," *RFE/RL*, June 14, 2006, <http://www.russian-news.com/msg04848.html>.

¹² "Main Events of SCO Secretariat in 2007," *SCO Web site*, November 20-21, 2007, http://sh.aiby.net/news_detail.asp?id=1966&LanguageID=2, quoted by Thierry Kellner, "Le 'dragon' et la tulipe": les relations sino-afghanes dans la période post-11 septembre," *Asia Papers*, Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies, January 2009, p. 14, [http://www.vub.ac.be/biccs/documents/APaper_Kellner_Thierry_\(2009\)_Le_dragon_et_la_tulipe_vol.4\(1\).pdf](http://www.vub.ac.be/biccs/documents/APaper_Kellner_Thierry_(2009)_Le_dragon_et_la_tulipe_vol.4(1).pdf).

¹³ "Musharraf said: SCO may join Nato in Afghanistan," *Pakistan Times*, April 14, 2008, <http://www.pakistantimes.net/2008/04/15/top.htm>; Pyotr Goncharov, "Settlement in Afghanistan: Back to 1997?" *Middle East Times*, May 09, 2008, http://www.metimes.com/Opinion/2008/05/09/settlement_in_afghanistan_back_to_1997/6245/.

the overall reinforcement of the SCO, which they believe could deny the Americans a monopoly over the Afghan question.¹⁴ The SCO organized several conferences on the topic of Afghanistan, such as the one in June 2008 on the shores of the Issyk-Kul Lake. The SCO's meeting in Moscow on March 27, 2009, with representatives from the G8 and all the international organizations engaged in Afghanistan, confirmed that the organization wants to be viewed as an unavoidable partner of the international coalition. Sergei Lavrov, heading the Russian delegation, said the SCO and CSTO proposed forming "belts of security" against drug and terrorism coming from Afghanistan.¹⁵ The SCO's summit in Yekaterinburg in June 2009 largely focused on the situation in Afghanistan and confirmed previous multilateral announcements.¹⁶

However, apart from its declarations of intent and its capacity to supervise negotiations with regional players, the SCO, as a multilateral organization, has little in the way of concrete proposals to offer Kabul: its financial means are very limited and the idea of creating collective military or humanitarian forces is difficult to accomplish and not a desirable objective for the member states. As Viktor Korgun, director of the Department of Afghan Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies of Moscow, has noted, advances in this domain can probably only happen bilaterally, mainly between Moscow and Beijing.¹⁷ However, some Afghanistan specialists, such as Alexander Knyazev, who is based at Bishkek and presents the Russian point of view, believe that even though the SCO is unable to deploy military forces on a scale similar to NATO's, it can nevertheless play a major role on two levels: by helping to accelerate Afghanistan's economic integration with the rest of Central Asia and China, and by organizing intra-Afghan negotiations with all the players concerned, including the Taliban.¹⁸ The idea that a military solution will not suffice and that Afghanistan will only be stabilized through economic development—an

¹⁴ M. K. Bhadrakumar, "Russia stops US on road to Afghanistan," January 27, 2009, <http://www.warandpeace.ru/en/commentaries/view/31954/>.

¹⁵ "Moscow hosts conference on Afghanistan," *Rian Novosti*, March 27, 2008, en.rian.ru/world/20090327/120771499.html.

¹⁶ "Zaiavlenie gosudarstv – chlenov ShOS i Islamskoi Respubliki Afganistan" [Declaration of the SCO states members and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan], March 27, 2009, http://sco2009.ru/docs/documents/afganistan_statement.html.

¹⁷ Viktor Korgun, "Shankhaiskaia Organizatsiia Sotrudnichestva v regione Tsentral'noi Azii" [The SCO in the Central Asian Region], *Afghanistan.ru*, June 17, 2008, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/12315.html>.

¹⁸ Alexander Knyazev, "Nuzhen li Shankhaiskoi Organizatsii Sotrudnichestva Afganistan?" [Does the SCO need Afghanistan?], *Knyazev.org*, January 23, 2009, <http://www.knyazev.org/>.

assumption guiding China's settlement practices in the country¹⁹—seems to also be gaining traction in Russia.

Moscow's Growing Economic Engagement in Afghanistan

For several years, Russia has promised Afghanistan that it will invest in its economic development. However, outstanding Afghan debts to the Soviet Union prevented Russian companies from obtaining bank loans to do so. This question was settled in 2007, after the Paris Club announced a reduction in Afghan debt, forgiving 90 percent of the \$11 billion owed by Kabul (mostly made up of late fees), and providing for the payment of the remaining \$730 million over a period of 23 years.²⁰ This led to the revival of bilateral exchanges between Russia and Afghanistan.²¹ In August 2007, a Memorandum for the development of trade and economic relations between Russia and Afghanistan was signed, laying the groundwork for an intergovernmental agreement on economic and trade cooperation which could be signed in 2009 and would replace the Soviet-Afghan agreement of 1974—the current legal framework for bilateral trade. A Russian-Afghan council for business, uniting more than 60 enterprises, was also created. Under its auspices, a delegation of Afghan businessmen led by Omar Khakhilval, president of the Afghan Agency for Investments (AISA), visited Russia.

Between 2002 and 2008, Russian humanitarian aid to Afghanistan rose to \$30 million.²² In a letter to Hamid Karzai, Dmitri Medvedev promised more than 15,000 tons of flour and \$4 million in aid for 2009. Russian-Afghan trade exchanges, which developed throughout 2003-2004 as reconstruction got

¹⁹ For more details on the Chinese involvement, see Thierry Kellner, “Le ‘dragon’ et la ‘tulipe’: les relations sino-afghanes dans la période post-11 septembre”, *op. cit.*

²⁰ “Sotrudnichestvo s Afganistanom. Obshchie voprosy” [The Cooperation with Afghanistan. General Issues], *Mezhregional’nyi Tsentri Delovogo sotrudnichestva*, http://www.mcds.ru/default.asp?Mode=Review&ID_L0=6&ID_L1=27&ID_L2=191&ID_L3=1922&ID=&ID_Review=147935.

²¹ “Chto meshaet razvitiu rossiisko-afganskogo ekonomicheskogo sotrudnichestva?” *Afghanistan.ru*, March 5, 2008, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/11457.html>.

²² “Rossiisko-afganskoe torgovo-ekonomicheskoe sotrudnichestvo” [Russian-Afghan Economic and Trade Cooperation], *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, February 27, 2009, <http://www.mid.ru/ns-rasia.nsf/1083b7937ae580ae432569e7004199c2/432569d80021985f43256b5f00546c61?OpenDocument>.

underway, fell in 2005 as the security situation deteriorated.²³ In 2008, however, thanks to the debt forgiveness and Russian desire to establish itself in the country, Russian-Afghan trade underwent a rapid increase, exceeding \$190 million, which is 2.8 times greater than the previous year's figure (\$68 million).²⁴ The exchanges, however, were very unequal: Afghan exports to Russia accounted for only a very small part (less than 10 percent, mostly dried fruit and carpets²⁵), while Russian exports accounted for more than 90 percent.

History of Russian-Afghan Trade Exchanges²⁶

Year	Volume of exchanges in dollars
1998	21 million
1999	19 million
2000	16 million
2001	19 million
2002	37 million
2003	30 million
2004	80 million
2005	30 million
2006	15 million
2007	68 million
2008	190 million

Moscow views Afghanistan as a potential market for Russian products but also as a supplier of raw materials. From Russia, Afghanistan receives mostly kerosene

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The Russian trade is lower than that of the U.S. with Afghanistan, which seemed to rise to \$565 million in 2008 (<http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5310.html#2008>). However, this figure must be qualified, since the U.S. is involved in practically no projects for reconstructing the country's infrastructures.

²⁵ "Ob'em tovarooborota mezhdru Afganistanom i Rossiei v 2008 g. udvoilsia" [Trade between Afghanistan and Russia doubled in 2008], *Afghanistan.ru*, January 14, 2008, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/13793.html>.

²⁶ Rossiisko-afganskoe torgovo-ekonomicheskoe sotrudnichestvo" [Russian-Afghan Economic and Trade Cooperation], *Ministry of the Economic Development of the Russian Federation*, December 23, 2003, <http://www.economy.gov.ru/wps/wcm/connect/economylib/mert/welcome/economy/economiccooperation/coopr egionalorgdirect/doc1072189509453>, and "Rossiisko-afganskoe torgovo-ekonomicheskoe sotrudnichestvo" [Russian-Afghan Economic and Trade Cooperation], *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, February 27, 2009, *op. cit.*

(which comprises more than a third of Russian exports), metallic products, wood materials (one fourth of the exports), foodstuffs, particularly sugar and flour, machine parts related to aviation, and medicine. Russian firms would like to establish themselves more firmly in the Afghan food market, which is currently dominated by Pakistan. This may change, however, since Pakistan is having problems supplying its neighbor as it becomes unable to ensure its own food self-sufficiency. The gas and oil products markets, dominated by the Arab company Azizi Hotak Group, also interest Russia.²⁷

The Afghan arms market is particularly promising: the Mujahhidins have been able to reconvert Soviet arms in a profitable manner, particularly the famous Kalashnikov, the most widespread weapon in the country. From 2002 to 2005, Russia supplied the Afghan army with technological and military assistance to the tune of \$200 million. This practice has stopped, however, and Russia only contributed to plane and helicopter repairs for the Afghan armed forces in 2006. In the same year, the *Daily Telegraph* announced that Kabul was preparing to buy Russian arms worth more than \$400 million, but this information was never confirmed.²⁸ Today, the Afghan national army-in-training is being equipped by the U.S. with M-16s, but these do not seem to be operational in the local climatic conditions. Moscow therefore hopes to attract the interest of the Afghan Ministry of Defence for its AK-103 automatic rifles. It also criticizes the presence of Bulgarian and Serbian companies in the Afghan market that sell Russian technology without having the license to do so.²⁹ For the moment, Russia is limited to repairing Afghanistan's aviation equipment and to furnishing spare parts, without having a place in the official arms markets. But it is likely that the companies involved in this sector, such as Rosoboronexport, will attempt to secure a place in this market in the future. However, even if Russian arms are better at withstanding conditions in Afghanistan, the Afghan army has everything to gain by acquiring NATO military standards, since it guarantees the potential participation of

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Sergey Luzianin, "Afganistan – Tsentral'naia Aziia – Rossiia: opasnyi transit i parametry vzaimodeistviia (2005-2008)" [Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia: a Dangerous Transit and Parameters of Interaction], *Analitika*, October 29, 2006, <http://www.analitika.org/article.php?story=20061029224624662>.

²⁹ Sotrudnichestvo s Afganistanom. Voenno-tekhnicheskie kontakty" [Cooperation with Afghanistan. Military and Technical Contacts], *Mezhregional'nyi tsentr delovogo sotrudnichestva*, http://www.mcds.ru/default.asp?Mode=Review&ID_L0=6&ID_L1=27&ID_L2=191&ID_L3=1922&ID=&ID_Review=160296.

thousands of its men in the Alliance's operations in other war theaters or in peace-keeping operations and thereby helps to avoid social tensions within the army.³⁰

Kabul, for its part, is not very interested in Russian products, since they are often uncompetitive in comparison with those from Asia, especially China. Kabul is, however, interested in Russian investments. Even if Russian businesses are less efficient than their Chinese competitors, they employ locals, which has good repercussions for the population, while Chinese companies mostly import their own workers. In 2002, Moscow opened a trade office in Kabul and several Russian organizations made concrete proposals: Mashinoimport proposed to restore the nitrogen factory at Mazar i-Sharif, Kamaz to supply vehicles, Selkhopromexport to restore the Kabul flour combine, Rosneft to exploit deposits in the north of the country and to restore the Khodzha-Mazar i-Sharif pipeline, and Texnopromexport to restore the Naglu hydroelectric station. Several Russian companies claim to be interested in the agriculture irrigation industry. However, the majority of these projects have not come to fruition because of lack of investment and the question of debt settlement.³¹ It was therefore necessary to wait until 2007 for the cooperative projects to get underway again.

Currently, the largest project under Russian management involves the Naglu hydroelectric station, which has a capacity of 100 MW, is situated thirty kilometers from the capital city, and has been financed by a \$32 million loan from the World Bank. Tekhnopromexport, which constructed several thermal power stations in Afghanistan during the Soviet period, won the contract for the modernization of Naglu in 2006, and is in charge of supplying equipment, installation and maintenance. Close to sixty Russian specialists will work there as of 2010.³² The Russian company INSET, a specialist in the construction of hydroelectric mini-stations, has won four contracts: it is constructing a station of 12 MW in the Fayzabad province, and three of 400 KW each in Parvand, Paktia and Bamian. These mini-stations are a driving force of the country's economy, despite their modest size, since they will ensure the autonomy of the regions and provide local development that benefits the population. Zarubezhtranzstroj is responsible for

³⁰ I thank Karl Harbo for having brought this important element to my attention.

³¹ Rossiisko-afganskoe torgovo-ekonomicheskoe sotrudnichestvo" [Russian-Afghan Economic and Trade Cooperation], *Ministry of the Economic Development of the Russian Federation*, December 23, 2003, *op. cit.*

³² "Rossiiane vnov' osvetaiat Kabul" [The Russian once again gave light to Kabul], *CAWater.info*, June 18, 2008, <http://www.cawater-info.net/news/afghanistan/180608.htm>.

appraising the state of the Salang tunnel that links Kabul to the Northern provinces and was constructed by the Soviets. In 2007, the Mias mechanical construction factory—based in Cheliabinsk—obtained a contract in Afghanistan, its first outside of the CIS. Mias will supply tanks for oil products to the Afghan company Ghazanfar as part of the first oil and gas terminal in Khairaton.³³ The automobile firm Kamaz sold more than 1,000 units of its trucks to the Kabul municipality and to the Ministry of Construction, while Tupolev is completing the assembly of 2 TU-204 aircraft, which will shore up links between the two countries. Activity on the automobile construction joint-venture AFSOTR, which was shelved in 2003, has also resumed.³⁴

Other projects are under negotiation. For example, the Moscow Industry Bank (MIB) is planning to open a branch in Kabul that would finance Russian-Afghan projects. In 2008, the Afghan government approved the MIB becoming the majority shareholder of the Kabul construction plant and the Dzhah-ul-Seradz cement factory, which MIB will pay to upgrade. MIB also intends to build a small hydroelectric station of 10 MW that will provide the plant and the factory with enough energy to make them self-sufficient. The total cost of these three projects is estimated to be \$200 million. Additionally, the MIB is interested in upgrading grain silos in the Afghan capital city. Russian companies are also looking to establish themselves in another market: the booming telecommunications industry. Afghanistan counts more than three million telephone subscriptions, mostly mobile, and even if landline telephony cannot be widely developed, mobile telephony is bound to capture the national market. Russian companies have managed to construct third generation networks (3G) but they seem generally hesitant. For instance, Megafon, which has announced its desire to establish itself in the Afghan market, recently declined to make an offer for the privatization of Afghan Telecom.³⁵

³³ "Sotrudnichestvo s Afganistanom. Mashinostroenie" [Cooperation with Afghanistan. The Automobile Sector], *Mezhregional'nyi tsentr delovogo sotrudnichestva*, http://www.mcds.ru/default.asp?Mode=Review&ID_L0=6&ID_L1=27&ID_L2=191&ID_L3=1922&ID=&ID_Review=157864.

³⁴ "Rossiisko-afganskoe torgovo-ekonomicheskoe sotrudnichestvo" [Russian-Afghan Economic and Trade Cooperation], *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, February 27, 2009, *op. cit.*

³⁵ "Megafon zainteresovalsia afganskim rynkom mobil'noi svyazi" [Megafon is interested in the Afghan market of mobile phones], *Afghanistan.ru*, March 2, 2007, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/8220.html>; "MegaFon is ready to redeem assets before an IPO holding," *Sovremennye telekommunikatsii Rossii*, July 2008, <http://www.telecomru.ru/article/?id=3387>.

In the domain of extraction, Russian companies have not yet succeeded in winning large contracts. The oil and gas deposits that have been discovered and studied by Soviet geologists might nevertheless eventually be exploited by Russian companies. The Soviet Union was interested in Afghan deposits and, in the 1970s, imported as much as 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year from Afghanistan in exchange for technical assistance.³⁶ Concentrated in the country's north along the Gelmand River and in the Katavaz Basin, the oil fields are estimated to contain close to a million tons, and are thought to be easily exploitable with minimal investment costs. Several gas deposits situated close to Mazar i-Sharif (Jarkuduk, Shiberghan and Hoja-Gugerdag) have not been in operation since 1992 but could be restarted, especially since there are existing structures for gas exports to neighboring Uzbekistan, although these too would have to be restored. In 2002, Rosneft announced its interest in five oil and eight gas deposits, but subsequently closed down its branch in Kabul.³⁷ Afghanistan also possesses deposits of copper, lead, and zinc, as well as rare metals such as lithium, niobium, and beryllium. Russia, however, has not yet succeeded in becoming Kabul's leading partner in this domain. Two Russian companies, Tiazhpromexport and Soiuzmetallresurs, lost the tender to mine the copper deposit at Aynak—which was actually discovered by Soviet specialists and will be one of the largest in the world—to the China Metallurgical Group.³⁸

Afghanistan's development is also linked to the geopolitical energy projects that drive the great powers. Moscow is clearly trying to block the progress of rival projects. For example, Russia obviously wants to stop the progress of the U.S.-backed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, since this would provide Ashgabat with a gas export route that does not pass through Russia. Neither does Moscow wish to see oil exchanges between China and the Persian Gulf occur via Afghan territory, since this would make Beijing less dependent on supplies from Siberia and would negate part of Russia's geopolitical influence over China. Moscow must, however, find projects to attract the interest of the Afghan government. For the time being, the Kremlin seems primarily interested in the oil

³⁶ Anton Oleinik, "Lessons of Russian in Afghanistan," *Society*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2008, pp. 288-293.

³⁷ Viktor Averkov, "Teper' otkryta doroga krupnym neftianym kompaniiam" [The Road for Big Oil Companies is Now Open], *Afghanistan.ru*, March 28, 2006, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/5421.html>.

³⁸ "Afghanistan: China's Winning Bid for Copper Rights Includes Power Plant, Railroad," *Afghanistan Online*, November 24, 2007, http://www.afghan-web.com/economy/china_copper.html.

and gas deposits in northern Afghanistan. They are relatively good in terms of extraction, since the security situation in the northern regions is far less dangerous, and the old Soviet pipe networks would make it possible to join up with Central Asian export routes at less cost. It is nevertheless probable that Afghanistan's entry into Gazprom's orbit will elicit strong reactions as much from the U.S. as from China and India.

Russia is also interested in a trans-Afghan railway project going from Toragundi via Herat and Kandahar to Kabul, since this would link Kushka in Turkmenistan to Djalalabad, at the border with Pakistan. This route would reinforce the north-south axis that Moscow is striving to make a reality, increase the already-planned routes towards Iran twofold, and give Russian products a new point of access, via Pakistan, to the southern oceans. However, these north-south development projects presuppose that the Kremlin succeeds in establishing a common understanding with the transiting Central Asian states. Though Russian humanitarian aid to Afghanistan in part arrives at the Tajik-Afghan border on the Piandj River, the Central Asian states do not really seem to be integrated into the Russian strategy. Turkmenistan manages by itself the humanitarian aid that it grants to the Turkmen Afghans on the other side of the border, while Tajikistan is in the process of developing a real partnership with China based on the issue of Afghanistan, and is on the way to becoming one of the key pieces of Chinese involvement there.

In the medium term, Russia might therefore stand to lose some precious bases for a potential rapprochement with Kabul if it does not manage to provide some innovative solutions to integrate the bordering Central Asian states into its own Afghan strategy. In addition, Moscow's economic engagement remains limited by the state of Russian industries, whose level of technology makes them uncompetitive, especially in comparison to Chinese industries. The projects implemented by the Soviet Union made sense within a planned economy that was part of a large socialist space marked by a division of labour. But they no longer have any *raison d'être* in an Afghan economy that has opened up to the world. Nevertheless, the Afghan economy's glaring need of basic infrastructure, in particular in the sectors of energy, education, and health, opens a space for Russian companies with capabilities in this type of development.

Transforming the Memory of the Russo-Afghan Conflict Into an Asset

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 indirectly sounded the death knell of the Soviet Union, for two reasons. Firstly, the Kremlin became aware of internal issues in Central Asia that it had not suspected. The Central Asians made up a large segment of the first military deployments to Afghanistan, since the Soviet authorities initially thought that the intervention would be more readily accepted if carried out by soldiers who shared the same religion, and more or less the same language, as the Afghans. However, Moscow quickly became aware of the issue of Muslim solidarity, which led a certain number of Central Asian conscripts to sympathize with the Afghan Mujahhidins. In 1980, thirty Tajiks illegally went to Peshawar to offer their services to the Afghans, at the same time as riots erupted in Alma-Ata during the burial, in a military cemetery, of Muslim soldiers killed in Afghanistan. Less than four months after the beginning of the conflict, in March 1980, Moscow had to recall a large part of its Central Asian reservists deployed in Kabul. These events provoked a new reversal of Soviet religious policy in Central Asia: the scheduled Islamic conferences were cancelled, as were the visits of muftis to countries allied to the USSR, and anti-Islamic propaganda was relaunched. Again in 1984, demonstrations protesting the Soviet presence in Afghanistan shook the border zones of the Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek republics.³⁹ This unexpected insubordination from Central Asia over the Afghan question thus contributed, during the years of Andropov and Gorbachev, to Moscow's stricter directives towards local leaders and to the growing idea in Russia that the zone was a lost cause and could be abandoned.

Secondly, the Soviet military discovered the extreme difficulty of winning an asymmetrical war: technological superiority—heavy artillery, aviation, tanks—is not sufficient to fight effectively against guerillas who are enmeshed in the social fabric part of a country. At the end of 1985, Gorbachev was forced to negotiate the departure of Soviet troops, a process that ended in February 1989. Out of the 620,000 Soviet soldiers who served in Afghanistan, more than 15,000 died (these official figures are probably under-estimated), 60,000 were wounded, 10,000 became war invalids and more than 400,000 spent time in hospitals in Afghanistan. The army's inability to win an asymmetrical conflict, which shocked public opinion,

³⁹ Enders Wimbush, Alex Alexiev, "Soviet Central Asian Soldiers in Afghanistan," *A Rand Note*, no. 1634/1, January 1981; Alexandre Bennigsen, "The Impact of the Afghan War on Soviet Central Asia," in R. Klass (ed.), *Afghanistan. The Great Game revisited*, New York: Freedom House, 1987.

recurred in Chechnya, the impact of which is widely known.⁴⁰ Throughout the 1980s, Soviet public opinion adopted the slogan “never again.” The Afghan trauma greatly contributed to delegitimizing Soviet power in the years preceding perestroika and hurt the prestige of the army—the pillar of the regime—among a population weary of the sacrifices made abroad in the name of ideology and concerned with concrete improvements in daily life.

In 2009, as Russia marks the twenty-year anniversary of its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the situation is profoundly different. The humiliations of the years 1980-1990 have been partially erased: institutionalized memory has been pacified, ideological conflicts have attenuated, and nostalgia for Soviet greatness has grown. But these elements do not represent a backwards-looking attitude, since they are also part of the objective of reasserting an unmistakably modern Russian power—one that participates actively in the issues of globalization. In August 2008, a meeting between Dmitri Medvedev and Hamid Karzai in Dushanbe during the SCO summit helped confirm the wish of both countries to put a positive gloss on the history of their relations. In January 2009, in a letter to the Afghan president that was made public, Dmitri Medvedev referred to the longstanding nature of the Russian-Afghan friendship, skipping discretely over the difficult years of the Soviet invasion. The Russian Foreign Affairs Minister, Sergei Lavrov, maintained a similar discourse, declaring in Kabul in March 2009 that the two countries had no other choice but to strengthen their “historic friendship”.⁴¹

The Kremlin is not alone in rewriting history, since the Afghan authorities are also playing the hand of reconciliation. Hamid Karzai himself insists on dissociating contemporary Russia from the Soviet Union: “If one looks at our relations with the USSR, there are positive and negative pages, but with Russia we have very good relations.”⁴² The Russian Ambassador to Kabul, Zamir Kabulov, is particularly clear on this issue: “If the entire period of our relations is considered, then every objective researcher will recognize that there are numerous pages of positive

⁴⁰ Robert M. Cassidy, “Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict,” Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, February 2003, www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?PubID=125.

⁴¹ “Sergei Lavrov: u nas net inogo puti, krome ukrepleniia nashei istoricheskoi druzhby” [Sergey Lavrov: we do not have other way but strengthening our historical friendship], *Afghanistan.ru*, March 16, 2008, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/14283.html>.

⁴² “Dmitrii Medvedev posetit s vizitom Afganistan” [Dmitri Medvedev will visit Afghanistan], *Afghanistan.ru*, August 28, 2008, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/12787.html>.

Russian-Afghan cooperation,” that “the USSR contributed significantly to the country’s modernization” and that this past constitutes a solid basis for developing new relations. He also references Russian-Afghan cultural proximity: “We are two very close peoples. We have much in common on the historical and cultural levels.”⁴³ The spokesperson for the lower house of the Afghan parliament, Mohammad Yunus Kanuni, declared that “Russia has many more possibilities to restore and develop Afghanistan’s economy than other countries,”⁴⁴ with the implication that its historical role in the modernization of the country is *a priori* a positive thing.

It was in the same consensual atmosphere that the first Russian-Afghan forum was held in Moscow, in May 2009, gathering together a large Afghan delegation comprising ministers, senators and businessmen led by Afghan vice-president Karim Khalili. The delegation pointed to the long Russian-Afghan partnership and the good relations between the two countries. The discussions focused on Russia’s economic involvement in Afghanistan, in particular on already-existing Soviet projects, on Russian help in contributing to the electrification of the country, as well as on cultural questions, such as the proposal to open satellites of the large Russian universities in Kabul.⁴⁵

In Afghanistan, Russia openly plays the hand of the Soviet past. Since economic relations were relaunched in 2007, priority has been given to the restoring of Soviet projects. Though this declared continuity has its practical justifications—since Russian technicians can more easily restore construction and modernize infrastructures that they are familiar with—there is also a symbolic dimension. Moscow does not feel any shame in claiming its Soviet heritage in full view of the Afghan authorities, and the latter do not seem to be humiliated by this. The Russian authorities therefore regularly reference the years of Soviet-Afghan cooperation preceding the conflict, as a model for the type cooperation Russia is proposing today. Many Russian diplomatic representatives remind Afghans that

⁴³ Zamir Kabulov, “Rossiia gotova okazat’ pomoshch’ v vosstanovlenii afganskoi armii” [Russia is ready to help in the revival of the Afghan army], *Afghanistan.ru*, March 14, 2009, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/14181.html>.

⁴⁴ Aleksei Chichkin, “Rossiia: vozvrashchenie v Afganistan” [Russia: the return to Afghanistan], *FK-Novosti*, February 18, 2009, <http://www.fcinfo.ru/themes/basic/map-print.asp?folder=1506&prn=205966%3A3117>.

⁴⁵ Feruza Dzhani, “Vremia sobirat’: Afganistan prosit Rossiuu pomochtch v industrializatsii strany” [Time to plan: Afghanistan asks Russia for help in industrializing the country], *Ferghana.ru*, May 15, 2009, www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=6169.

Russia was the first state to recognize Afghanistan's independence under Amulla Khan; the ninety-year anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russian and Afghanistan was celebrated in April 2009.⁴⁶ Since the 1950s, the Soviet Union supported a program to modernize the country, launched by Mohammad Daud, and sent specialists to disseminate knowledge acquired in Central Asia, in areas such as agricultural irrigation.⁴⁷ The economic relations between Central Asia and Afghanistan are also referenced: in the 1950s, Afghanistan exported sugar cane to Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and in exchange imported metallurgic products from Kazakhstan.⁴⁸

Moscow's hypothesis, which is probably correct in terms of popular representation, is that the memory of the years of Soviet-Afghan conflict is partially erased by the three uninterrupted decades of civil war and foreign intervention. The Soviet intervention no longer represents a unique event and focal point in Afghan public opinion, but instead counts as one aggression among others. Since the Russian-Afghan conflict is already fairly distant in comparison with contemporary conflicts, its impact has been relativized. While all the great powers guilty of invasion are placed on par with one another, Russia alone can recall that its presence in Afghanistan is not limited to the 1979-1989 intervention, but started in the 1950s with considerable economic and technical aid to the Afghan monarchy, something the members of the coalition cannot claim. Russia has thus attempted to shift historical accusations about the British Empire's lack of engagement in Afghanistan, which left the population in poverty, onto the current NATO forces.

Valeri Ivanov, a former engineer and translator of Dari and Farsi who worked for two decades in several Afghan ministries, strongly defends the rehabilitation of the Soviet-Afghan past. Ivanov was Russia's economic and trade representative in Afghanistan between 1992 and 1996 and is currently a member of the Russo-Afghan council for business. In an interview with Ferghana.ru, Ivanov lauded the 142 "economic objectives" that the Soviet Union accomplished in Afghanistan. The largest projects took place in the energy sector: the hydroelectric stations at Naglu and at Puli-Khumri, several small electricity stations serving mid-size towns and districts of Kabul, several high-tension electricity cables, such as the one from the Soviet border to Kunduz, a gas pipeline linking the deposits to the nitrogen

⁴⁶ Zamir Kabulov, "Rossiia gotova okazat' pomoshch' v vosstanovlenii afganskoi armii", *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ N. Mendkovich, "Istoriia modernizatsiia Afganistana" [History of the Modernization of Afghanistan], *CAWater.info*, January 23, 2008, <http://www.cawater-info.net/news/afghanistan/230108.htm>.

⁴⁸ Aleksei Chichkin, "Rossiia: vozvrashchenie v Afganistan", *op. cit.*

factory at Mazar i-Sharif, itself also built by the Soviets, and an 88km-long gas pipeline that joined up with the Soviet border and passed through Amu-Daria to several oil parks. In the transport sector, the USSR financed the construction of several roads, such as those between Kushka and Kandahar, between Doshi and Shirkhan, and the Salang tunnel. It also invested in a factory that produces Kamaz trucks, as well as an asphalt and a concrete factory, implemented irrigation networks, built a residential suburb in Kabul and constructed several meteorological stations.⁴⁹ The majority of this infrastructure was destroyed in the 1990s, but today is a central focus of new Russian investments in the country, even if some projects will be difficult to restore.

In focusing on the technical side of Soviet aid, Russia hopes to place itself in a more favorable position than its international competitors. Focused primarily on political and security questions, the western countries have not bettered the daily lives of citizens, and their presence has left little impact on the Afghan landscape. Russian experts thus claim that since NATO troops arrived in Afghanistan, they have not built any enterprises, roads, or electricity stations; this statement is extreme but is regularly highlighted in the press.⁵⁰ Soviet aid, on the contrary, is presented as having had an immediately beneficial effect on the population, since it was linked with the basic infrastructure of the country. Moscow also regularly discusses the issue of education and claims that one of its main objectives is the reconstruction of the Afghan education system. Here again, the Soviet past is used as a reference point: in 1968, the USSR built the Kabul Polytechnic University, which could host 1,200 students, a technical institute for specialists in hydrocarbons at Mazar i-Sharif, a technical institute in automobile mechanic at Kabul, but also the Institute of Social Sciences close to the Afghan Communist Party and a school for 1,300 pupils with courses held in Russian. Negotiations regarding the restoration and re-opening of these establishments are underway. Moscow therefore proposes to rehabilitate these old projects and to benefit from the Russophone circles made up of the specialized Afghan technicians and intellectuals educated during the Soviet period. A similar pattern exists in the military sector. Since 2006, Russia has expressed interest in helping to train the

⁴⁹ Valerii Ivanov, “My postroili v Afganistane 142 bazovykh ob’ekta ekonomiki strany” [We have built 142 basic objects of the country’s economy], *Ferghana.ru*, June 21, 2008, www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5747.

⁵⁰ Sotrudnichestvo s Afganistanom. Obshchie voprosy” [Cooperation with Afghanistan. General Issues], Mezhhregional’nyi tsentr delovogo sotrudnichestva, http://www.mcds.ru/default.asp?Mode=Review&ID_L0=6&ID_L1=27&ID_L2=191&ID_L3=1922&ID=&ID_Review=161341.

National Afghan Army, noting that many military personnel speak Russian. Hamid Karzai supported this idea.⁵¹

Russian strategy therefore consists in differentiating itself from the U.S. Alexander Kniazev thus emphasizes the scant amount of aid proposed by Washington for economic reconstruction. According to him, the U.S. is in Afghanistan for global strategic and geopolitical reasons related to managing their world supremacy, and has no specific objectives for economic reconstruction, in contrast to Afghanistan's neighbors, who desire real stabilization for the country. According to him, launching large infrastructure construction projects would employ thousands of young Afghans, and thereby make them less likely to be won over by the Taliban militias—which find their recruits among unemployed youths—or to participate in harvesting opium. Here again, the Soviet experience retroactively confirms Russian contentions. Kniazev claims that the Soviet Union supplied work for tens of thousands of Afghans for its large-scale projects in the country in the 1960s and that it can continue to apply the same tactic today.⁵²

Russian Lobbies, Groups of Influence and Prospective Reflections on Afghanistan

Russia's emphasis on the positive nature of the Soviet past is not specific to the Afghan case. For several years, Russia has been involved in wide-ranging efforts to rehabilitate its great power past, touting the USSR's capacity for industrialization, which goes hand in hand with the idea of a return to the arms race. Russia also hopes to unite all the segments of its society around Soviet historical events. Even though the invasion of Afghanistan never gained broad support in the Soviet Union, today it is generally accepted thanks to a widespread tendency to revere veterans, principally those of the Second World War, but also, to a lesser extent, those of Afghanistan and Chechnya. Organized in associations to fight for their rights, many such former soldiers in Afghanistan have initiated wide-ranging

⁵¹ "Karzai Claims Defense Deal With Russia," *Military.com*, January 20, 2009, <http://www.military.com/news/article/karzai-claims-defense-deal-with-russia.html>.

⁵² "Otchet o rabote mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii 'Afghanistan, ShOS, bezopasnost' i geopolitika Tsentral'noi Azii'" [Contents of the work of the international conference 'Afghanistan, the SCO, security and geopolitics of Central Asia'], http://www.knyazev.org/stories/html/chang_180908.shtml.

activities, in particular among the youth, playing a key role in the development of sports and military patriotic associations for children and adolescents.

Russia's current "return" to Afghanistan includes the participation of many former soldiers who served there. Members of the movement "Fraternity of Combat" (*boevoe bratstvo*), for example, which unites former Soviet military personnel—a number of which were wounded in combat in Afghanistan—have visited Kabul to develop contacts, to serve as intermediaries for Russian businessmen looking to set up in the country, or to manage programs for humanitarian assistance.⁵³ General Valentin Varennikov, who led the operational group of the Minister of Defense in Afghanistan between 1984 and 1989 and is notable for his 1991 participation in the conservative putsch attempt to dislodge Mikhail Gorbachev, has also made several official visits to renew contact with Afghan military personnel.⁵⁴ It is remarkable how much those who served in Afghanistan—who are the most traumatized by the experience and would be thought to be unwilling to return—today seem to have become a central element of Russian-Afghan relations and are also well-received in Afghanistan itself.

To carry out its entryist policies, Russia is also seeking to revitalize the Russophile Afghan lobbies. Two in particular can be identified: those of politicians of communist sensibility and those of the Northern Alliance. On this point, too, Soviet continuity dominates, since these two groups have historically been the conveyors of Russian influence in Afghanistan. Former Afghan communists, such as Djan Gul Kargar, an erstwhile member of the Communist Party and current deputy of the National Assembly, maintain that the Afghan population lived better under Soviet domination, which brought the country real economic development, which he claims is lacking under the current coalition.⁵⁵ Several members of Nadjibulla's former Communist government, which collapsed in 1992, maintained a similar discourse, as do certain media figures and experts, such as Kasim Akhgar.⁵⁶ If Russia has always found support among the country's Uzbek and Tajik

⁵³ Viacheslav Nekrasov, "Afganistan: trudnyi put' k miru" [Afghanistan: a difficult path to peace], *Rossia segodnia*, no. 22, 2005, http://www.russia-today.ru/2005/no_22/22_world.htm.

⁵⁴ Valentin Varennikov, "Afganskie vlasti zainteresovany v sotrudnichestve s Rossiei v voenno-tekhnicheskoi oblasti" [The Afghan authorities are interested in cooperating with Russia in the military and technical sectors], *Afghanistan.ru*, March 17, 2008, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/11554.html>.

⁵⁵ "Byvshii lider NDPA: v sovetskie vremena my zhili luchshe" [The Former Leader of the NDPA: We lived better during Soviet Times], *Afghanistan.ru*, December 28, 2008, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/10890.html>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

minorities, it can also count on certain influence networks among the Pashtuns, in particular among the groups situated between Kabul and Kandahar who were long part of the Communist coalition before the civil war in 1992. Although weaker than it once was, this network could still be reactivated, allowing Moscow to have direct contact with small Pashtun groups.

Moreover, some observers, such as Andrei Serenko, mention a new Russian activism in the past several months in the South of Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. According to Serenko, some pro-Russian Taliban groups have even appeared in Waziristan.⁵⁷ During the Russian-Afghan forum in May 2009, the presence of numerous Pashtun businessmen and politicians such as the deputy from Nangarhar, Mohammad Hashim Vatanval, known for being close to the Taliban, was noticed. This was, of course, criticized by Northern Alliance members but represented a positive new element of the Russian policy in Afghanistan by Pashtun delegates.⁵⁸ The Kremlin is seemingly developing its own network in the South, reinforcing its position in case of Hamid Karzai's defeat in the upcoming presidential election or the political strengthening of the Taliban.

Northern Afghanistan, principally populated by Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen, was historically always much more closely linked to Russian and Central Asian issues than the Pashtun south. During the Soviet period, its geographical proximity to the southern borders of the USSR and the cultural and linguistic proximity to the people of the Central Asian federated republics intensified Moscow's will to invest in the Northern provinces. During the civil war, the Northern Alliance (National and Islamic United Front for the Freedom of Afghanistan), which includes several movements of Mujahhidin opposed to the Taliban, was the privileged beneficiary of Russian financial and military support, despite the ferocious opposition of Ahmed Shah Massud's network to the Soviet invasion. In this task Moscow was backed up by Dushanbe, which provided support for ethnically Tajik groups, while Uzbekistan did not conceal its special relations with the Afghan Uzbek General Dostum, a famous former pro-Soviet figure. For several years now the deterioration of the Karzai administration's relations with the Northern Alliance has jeopardized the unity of the country and reinforced ethnic divisions: the

⁵⁷ Andrei Serenko, "Na 'linii Diuranda' poiavilis' 'russkie talibany'" ['Russian Taliban' have appeared on the Durand line], *Afghanistan.ru*, May 29, 2009, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/14815.html>.

⁵⁸ "Pashtuns have Moscow," *Islamic News*, May 15, 2009, <http://cnobbi.com/2305.html>.

regional leaders of the North are increasingly independent of the decisions made by the central authorities in Kabul.

Since 2007, Russia has reactivated its ties with the Northern Alliance by reopening its consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif and hosting a delegation of former Northern Alliance warlords, including founding-member Mohammed Yunus Qanun.⁵⁹ Karzai's decision to name Mohammed Fahim, who some observers believe to be a former member of the Soviet-trained Afghan State Information Agency (KHAD)⁶⁰ as his running mate for the upcoming presidential election could potentially give Russia more opportunities in Afghanistan. Fahim has close ties with Russian intelligence services and was the first high-level Afghan official to visit Russia in 2002. The Russophile lobby nevertheless does not constitute such an easy card for Moscow to play. Though the different factions of the Northern Alliance insist on their proximity to the former USSR—but focus more on their close relationship with the Central Asian states than with Russia proper—they are not motivated by a principled solidarity with Moscow, but by stakes internal to Afghanistan and its inter-group balance, which in reality does not give Moscow much leeway. In addition, Russia has no interest in appearing to support one clan against another and to be working against the national unity embodied by Karzai.

Afghanistan remains a divisive subject within the Russian leadership. Some, including many military officers, believe that it is better to leave NATO alone in Afghanistan and do not wish to re-open the traumatic experience of the Soviet intervention. Increasingly, however, many others are convinced of the necessity of intervening alongside NATO for several reasons: some want to avoid a NATO failure, which would be detrimental for all, by inviting the regional partners to get involved on the ground; others because they are concerned about the strong U.S. presence that they suspect represents a long-term American geopolitical goal to control the Eurasian continent. Russian interest in Afghanistan, which was for a long time purely defensive—focusing on how to resist the spread of heroin and

⁵⁹ Nicklas Norling, "Don't put Afghanistan in 'Reset' with Russia," Real Clear World, June 6, 2009, http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2009/06/dont_put_afghanistan_in_reset.html.

⁶⁰ Fergal Keane, "We must devote more money, troops and political capital to Afghanistan," *The Independent*, September 13, 2003, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/we-must-devote-more-money-troops-and-political-capital-to-afghanistan-579758.html>; see also the Panjshir province web page from the Program for Culture and Conflict Studies, <http://www.nps.edu/Programs/CCS/Docs/Executive%20Summaries/Panjshir%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>.

Islamist destabilization—is beginning to elicit more complex discussions that call for the creation of a long-term strategy towards Kabul. This new activism is particularly developed among those of nationalist sensibility, who want an innovative Russia, active both in the post-Soviet space and among its former allies of the socialist bloc.

Some Russian experts do not hesitate to declare Afghanistan's non-viability as a state. They see it as a buffer zone born of the Russian-British "Great Game" of the nineteenth century and claim it will inevitably be divided along a north-south axis, at which point Russia will have the opportunity to become more involved in the northern regions. The political scientist Alexander Savkin, who asserts the likelihood of such a scenario, explains that "Russia has the moral and historical right to defend its interests in Afghanistan. Russia's unique capacity to integrate other peoples and cultures has enabled it to be a centrally formative element on the Eurasian continent for three centuries."⁶¹ to the idea of creating a buffer zone in the northern regions is also put forward by Shakh Makhmud, a researcher at the MGIMO, the Institute of international relations affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁶² Russian theories on partitioning Afghanistan remain rare, however, since Russia does not have any interest in seeing border changes in Central Asia, such as an extension of Tajikistan for example—a harbinger of major destabilizations. But it seems that certain political circles close to the Kremlin more calmly foresee a transformation of the Mazar i-Sharif region into a sort of Russian-Central Asian protectorate serving as a buffer zone from the rest of Afghanistan, which would supposedly enable the curbing of drug trafficking and Islamist networks.

Yuri Krupnov, a publicist at the Institute of Demography, Migrations and Regional Development in Moscow, known for his book *To Be a World Power*, published a small brochure in 2008 that addressed the situation in Afghanistan. He condemned the two prevailing attitudes: the first one of indifference and a refusal of interference, which would give the U.S. a free hand in Afghanistan; the second that advocates Russian engagement in the northern provinces, which would abandon

⁶¹ Alexander Savkin, "Russia: go home or go away?" *Rosbalt*, September 9, 2008, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/2008/09/09/521605.html>.

⁶² Shakh Makhmud, "Retsepty mira i stabil'nost' v Afganistane. Rol' ShOS v poiske putei afganskogo uregulirovaniia" [Recipes for peace and stability in Afghanistan. The SCO role in the search for an Afghan settlement], *Afghanistan.ru*, December 16, 2008, <http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/13618.html>.

the south of the country to the Taliban. Krupnov puts forward a third alternative: that Moscow become involved in promoting a unified Afghan state by developing a rival project to the “Greater Central Asia” theorized by Frederick Starr. Krupnov proposes a new “Greater Middle-East” under Russian guidance that would link Central Siberia to the Persian Gulf as one of its major axes. Its goal would be to attract Afghanistan and the Central Asian states, but also Iran, into a dynamic that would be led by Russia and achieved through the creation of a common economic space. Siberian industrial materials would be exported to Central Asia and Afghanistan, allowing Russian products to reach the southern oceans. This model is inspired by previous Soviet undertakings, since it would be carried out through the industrialization and launching of massive infrastructure projects: railway networks, road networks, irrigation systems, school establishments and technical universities.⁶³ There are many ultimate objectives: to avoid any fracturing of Russia along the Urals, to exclude the U.S. from a part of the Middle East, and to curb Chinese ambitions in the zone.

For the moment, all these projects are entirely theoretical and are not considered by the Kremlin to be effective. Even if Russia were to decide to pursue a strategy of interference, it would need to have influence networks in place in Kabul and the rest of the country that are easy to manipulate, something that is not currently the case. However, this intellectual activism and the recent multiplication of study centers on Afghanistan in Russia confirm the return of the Afghan question to Russian geopolitical discussions and the likely end of the taboo on Russian-Afghan relations.

Conclusion

In foreign policy terms, Russia is interested in becoming more closely involved in Afghanistan. It can use such involvement to restore its recognition among western countries by forcing itself on NATO as a necessary partner in any settlement of the Afghan conflict. It also hopes, in the longer term, to retain its foothold in a strategic zone where China and India are looking to establish themselves, and that Iran considers its backyard. Within the post-Soviet space, the weakness of the

⁶³ Yuri Krupnov, *Put' k miru i soglasiuu v Afganistane opredeliaetsia pozitsiei, kotoruiu zaimet Rossiia. Proekto-analiticheskii doklad* [The Path to Peace and Understanding in Afghanistan will be defined by the position taken by Russia. Prospective Analytical Report], Moscow: Institut demografii, migratsii i regional'nogo razvitiia, 2008, p. 24.

Central Asian states that border Afghanistan can only be of concern to Russia: were the Afghan crisis not resolved, Moscow would be doomed to a head-on confrontation with new elements of destabilization, which could also put the regime at risk as far away as the Caucasus. Russia is thus preparing itself to negotiate with all the Afghan actors, including the Taliban. In addition, the Kremlin hopes to benefit strategically from the difficulties facing the international coalition, as all the bordering powers demand a say in any solution to the Afghan problem.

However, Russian firms remain quite reluctant to establish themselves in a dangerous market and are concerned by the American presence, which might prove to be detrimental to Russian economic interests.⁶⁴ For the time being, Moscow remains an economic partner of little importance for Kabul and the Afghan regime's sudden interest in a Russian partnership is, above all, a way to pressure its American ally and force its hand in terms of political support.

Afghanistan also has domestic implications for Russia, whose place in the world has been shaped by profound social and ideological evolutions. Often in the history of Russia, engagement in Central Asia allows it to stand up to the West. The reconciling of institutionalized memory vis-à-vis the Soviet past is in itself favorable to a return to influence in Afghanistan, but this seems incompatible with the xenophobic fears of Russian public opinion towards people from the Caucasus, Central Asia and Afghanistan. If some Russian lobbies seem to be structuring themselves in favor of renewed activism in Afghanistan, the Kremlin's ability to develop strategies to co-opt the Afghan elite remains to be seen: no long-term vying for influence is possible in this country without reliable allies.

⁶⁴ Yuri Krupnov, "Rossiisko-afganskoe ekonomicheskoe sotrudnichestvo: problemy, perspektivy i proekty" [Russian-Afghan Economic Cooperation: Problems, Perspectives and Projects], Moscow: Institut demografii, migratsii i regional'no go razvitiia, March 6, 2009, <http://www.idmrr.ru/news/sotrudnichestvo.html>.

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