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Russia's good cop, bad cop strategy in Afghanistan

Russia is concerned with a worsening security situation in Afghanistan. To avert further escalation, it is ready to use diverse means of aversion

Russia has fundamental interests in Afghanistan. Three Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). As a member of the CSTO, Russia guarantees the security of these three countries, and maintains military bases and facilities on their territory. The possibility of international terrorist groups from Afghanistan crossing the borders into Central Asia is seen as a serious threat within the CSTO. Fending off groups of armed insurgents attempting to cross the borders (especially the Tajik-Afghan border) is a key element of the CSTO's mission when it comes to Central Asia.

At one-point, intense dialogue was underway between the CSTO and NATO regarding potential cooperation on an anti-terrorist and anti-drugs agenda in connection with Afghanistan. The Secretary General of the CSTO, Nikolai Bordyuzha, even offered assistance to NATO in the matter. For example, as Operation Enduring Freedom was taking place in Afghanistan, Moscow approved the expansion of military bases belonging to the US and NATO member states on the soil of CSTO countries in Central Asia. Until relatively recently, it also allowed the transit of non-lethal cargo projectiles through the Russian city of Ulyanovsk, with the port of Riga acting as the main transfer hub. These steps could have facilitated dialogue between Russia and the North Atlantic Alliance, but, unfortunately, NATO was only prepared to partner with the member states of the CSTO on a bilateral basis at that time.

Of course, in the current context of a new Cold War, no such partnership between CSTO and NATO is possible, but Europe should be aware that the CSTO has been fulfilling (and continues to fulfil) a certain function on the Afghan border that is conducive to international stability.

Russian interests in Central Asia

As part of the CSTO agreement, Russia is actively helping Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to develop their armed forces, a move which is reinforcing their independence and state sovereignty in the context of the threat from international terrorism and potential incursions by extremist and mafia-style groups from Afghanistan.

However, Russia's interest in supporting stability in Central Asia is not limited to issues arising from the CSTO. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are also members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The member states of the EEU have an open-border policy, as in the EU, which allows for the free movement of goods and people. Yet this means that any destabilisation in the countries of Central Asia caused by the worsening situation in Afghanistan could lead to a large number of refugees and other migration issues for Russia.

Members of various terrorist groups in Central Asia, especially those linked to ISIS, have carried out terrorist attacks far beyond the borders of their own region.

Unfortunately, if a major migration crisis were to emerge in Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries in Central Asia, Europe could end up suffering just as much as Russia, as refugees would be directed through Russian territory to richer countries with more hospitable immigration policies. A crisis such as the one that is currently flaring up on Belarus' borders (which, admittedly, has its own root causes) could break out in Russia itself, in spite of its attempts to avoid such a situation.

Russia is particularly concerned by the militant activities of the Islamic State-Khorasan group in Afghanistan, whose scope broadly includes post-Soviet Central Asia, as well as by Al-Qaeda and its affiliate terrorist groups of post-Soviet origin. These include the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the extremist organisation Jamaat Ansarullah in Tajikistan. Russia also has common interests with the western world in this area. Members of various terrorist groups in Central Asia, especially those linked to ISIS, have carried out terrorist attacks far beyond the borders of their own region.

In 2017, three major terrorist attacks took place across the globe. A man hailing from Uzbekistan carried out an attack in Stockholm, while his compatriot carried out an attack in New York, and a group of Central Asian origin carried out the terror attack on the St Petersburg underground. In this context, it is significant that 2017–2019 saw an influx of Russian-speaking militants into the northern regions of

Afghanistan. Originally from Central Asia, they had relocated to Syria and Iraq before making their way to Afghanistan.

Is Russia really pro Taliban?

At present, Russia is pursuing a policy aimed at foiling the threats described above as far as Afghanistan is concerned. In effect, Russia has guaranteed its own security in both scenarios: the positive development of the situation in Afghanistan, as well as its negative development.

If the situation develops favourably, Russia will progress its dialogue with the Taliban with the aim of encouraging the ruling group's moderate factions. In this case, the dialogue would primarily take place via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Embassy in Kabul, and also through Moscow format talks with the Taliban and the international community.

Russia has argued that the recognition of the Taliban would be in the interests of several countries at the very least.

If the situation in Afghanistan takes a turn for the worse, and the more radical arm of the Taliban gains a foothold, Russia will be able to defend itself and the states of Central Asia through measures that are well-established within the CSTO. In a sense, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs can be seen as the 'good cop', while the Russian Ministry of Defence and the CSTO are the 'bad cops', to borrow a metaphor from Hollywood. The latter are building their security forces so that the Taliban don't make any attempt to break their promises, especially when it comes to security in Central Asia.

For this reason, Russia's position can hardly be construed as definitively pro-Taliban, as many media outlets are reporting. Russia has declared multiple times that it is prepared to support the moderate wing of the Taliban as long as they pursue beneficial domestic policies, create an inclusive government, guarantee the security of Central Asian countries, expel international terrorists from the country, and take a stand against illegal drugs. Regarding its recognition of the Taliban government and removal of the organisation from its list of groups 'banned by Russian legislation', Russia has argued that other countries should follow suit and that the recognition of the Taliban would be in the interests of several countries at the very least.

A Russo-European vision for Afghanistan

Which interests are currently shared by Russia and EU countries when it comes to Afghanistan?

First of all, the need to avert a political and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, the creation of an inclusive government, and the establishment of effective governance. They are also seeking to avoid a famine over the winter, as well as the civil war brewing between different ethnic groups and different factions within the Taliban.

Such a conflict would be particularly dangerous because of the risk that states such as India, Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, and other countries in the Gulf of Arabia and Central Asia could be dragged in against their will.

Russia and the EU are also equally invested in preventing a new migration crisis linked to Afghanistan, the threat of which is entirely realistic, especially given the famine which is taking hold in the country.

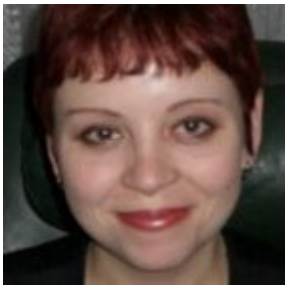
Finally, the issue of the struggle against international terrorism, the narcotics industry and drugs trafficking is present.

In the context of the current lack of dialogue between Russia and Europe, the new Cold War and mutual sanctions, collaboration to overcome the political and humanitarian crisis which is unfolding in Afghanistan could have a positive effect on relations between the two sides.



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