



Written by on January 28, 2009

## The Expanding War in Afghanistan

The French Press Agency (AFP) quoted the general, speaking after talks with the Pakistani government: "It is very important, as we increase effort in Afghanistan, that we have multiple routes that go into the country. There have been agreements reached and there are transit lines now and transit agreements for commercial goods and services in particular that include several countries in the central Asian states and also Russia."



Petraeus said he had visited Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan to reach agreements.

Back on December 11, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates made a brief stop at Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, the base from which U.S. flights into Afghanistan are dispatched. While at the base, Gates told U.S. troops: "The final decision will be made by the next president [Obama], but a consensus has emerged that more troops are needed."

Speaking to reporters from Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, where he had been having talks with Uzbek President Islam Karimov, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said on January 23 that his government is receptive to cooperation with the United States and NATO in opening up new supply routes and other matters.

"Let us hope the new U.S. administration will be more successful in the Afghan settlement than its predecessor," said Medvedev's, whose comments at a news conference were quoted by Reuters news service. "We are ready for fully fledged and equal cooperation on security in Afghanistan, including with the United States. We are ready to work on the most complicated issues ... including the transit of nonmilitary goods."

The Russian president's remarks were viewed as a thawing of his country's relations with NATO, which had been strained when some NATO members were critical of Moscow's operations during its brief war in Georgia last August. Two weeks after the end of that conflict, Russia recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both provinces that had broken away from Georgia, as independent states. NATO called Russia's military response to Georgia's attack on South Ossetia "disproportionate" and condemned Moscow's decision to recognize the former Georgian republics.

State Department spokesman Robert Wood told reporters concerning Medvedev's willingness to cooperate: "We certainly look forward to working with Russia on Afghanistan." Wood added that the appointment of the U.S. diplomatic corps' veteran insider Richard Holbrooke as special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan "shows you how serious the administration is about trying to work on these issues and working with Russia will be a key component (of) that."

A report from the Russian News and Information Agency (RIA Novosti) on January 27 quoted Russia's NATO envoy in Brussels, Dmitry Rogozin, who said: "We are ready to discuss the details of the transits



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even tomorrow, but the problem is that NATO's international secretariat has not yet coordinated these details with other transit countries." The report explained that because Russia does not share a border with Afghanistan, NATO needs to negotiate with the central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, etc.) to secure transit rights to Afghanistan's northern border.

According to RIA, Rogozin also said that "Russia would not send its troops to Afghanistan to fight against Taliban militants, but would help the war effort in the country by sending its own non-lethal supplies to support the NATO-led coalition forces."

Maybe the Russians have learned the hard way the perils of getting bogged down in Afghanistan. Russia's predecessor Soviet government invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. After 10 years of fighting, during which it spent the equivalent of \$20 billion a year and suffered 15,000 casualties, the Soviets withdrew in early 1989. Ironically, the United States had supported Afghan resistance leader Osama bin Laden during the Soviet occupation, only to have bin Laden set up shop for his al Qaeda terrorist force under Taliban protection.

An article in the *Asia Times* for January 27, "[Russia stops US on road to Afghanistan](#)," by the Indian career diplomat M. K. Bhadrakumar explored some of the finer points of General Petraeus's efforts to secure new supply routes to support the expanding U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. The *Times* reported that within a day of Petraeus' statement that agreements had been reached for new supply routes, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Maslov disputed Petraeus' statement, telling the Itar-Tass news agency: "No official documents were submitted to Russia's permanent mission in NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] certifying that Russia had authorized the United States and NATO to transport military supplies across the country."

The *Times* also quoted Russia's NATO envoy, Dmitry Rogozin, as saying: "We know nothing of Russia's alleged agreement of military transit of Americans or NATO at large. There had been suggestions of the sort, but they were not formalized." However, Rogozin did indicate that Russia has its own motives to cheer on NATO from the sidelines:

I can responsibly say that in the event of NATO's defeat in Afghanistan, fundamentalists who are inspired by this victory will set their eyes on the north. First they will hit Tajikistan, then they will try to break into Uzbekistan.... If things turn out badly, in about 10 years, our boys will have to fight well-armed and well-organized Islamists somewhere in Kazakhstan.

The thrust of Bhadrakumar's lengthy essay is that Russia — while willing to offer limited cooperation to NATO efforts in Afghanistan, most likely owing to its fear of radical Islamic militancy expanding to its own borders — has its own agenda in central Asia. The former Indian ambassador views Russian President Medvedev's recent talks with Uzbek President Karimov as an effort to strengthen the bond between the two nations.

Bhadrakumar quoted Medvedev as characterizing that bond between Russia and Uzbekistan as a "strategic partnership and alliance" and as saying that Russia's cooperation with Uzbekistan had taken on an "exceptional importance" on matters relating to Afghanistan.

As Bhadrakumar summed up the scenario: "Plainly put, Moscow will not allow a replay of the US's tactic after September 11, [2001], when it sought a military presence in Central Asia as a temporary measure and then coolly proceeded to put it on a long-term footing."

The article also suggested that Russian President Medvedev, in anticipation of an impending U.S. withdrawal of support from Afghan President Hamid Karzai in favor of different Afghan leadership, had



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contacted Karzai with an offer of military aid.

The [article](#) is worth reading in its entirety.

In the chessboard that is Afghanistan, there are many pawns and players. It is likely that Russia, having learned the futility of military engagement in Afghanistan, is seeking to protect its interests in the region diplomatically, letting the Americans and their NATO allies pay the higher price in blood and billions of dollars this time around.

Only adherence to our Constitution and the advice of Founding Fathers against foreign entanglements can prevent such tragic loss. But for the foreseeable future, the internationalists who have controlled our nation's foreign policy for the past 70 years or more will not allow that sensible option.



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