



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on April 3, 2013

Will Russia Establish Bases in Afghanistan?

In a story reported by [Russia Today](#) on March 28, Sergey Koshelev, identified as head of the Russian Defense Ministry's department of international cooperation, said that his ministry will soon begin discussions with NATO representatives to seek an arrangement allowing Russia to establish new bases in Afghanistan to repair military hardware.

"We will look into various options of creating repair bases on Afghan territory," Koshelev told the press.



RT cited Koshelev's statement that the maintenance of weapons and military hardware in Afghanistan remains a top priority, opining that any instability in the country would affect Russia's own security, as well as the security of other European nations. The report continued:

Russian NATO envoy Aleksandr Grushko also said that Moscow was not excluding the possibility of broader cooperation with the military bloc. In particular, Russia could offer to enlarge the transport corridor to Afghanistan, so that the country's own forces could continue to receive supplies from Western allies after coalition troops leave Afghanistan in 2014.

The report also quoted Russian State Duma Defense Committee First Deputy Chairman Sergei Zhigarev (roughly the equivalent of the chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Armed Services). Zhigarev said in a statement to RSN radio:

In any case this [Russia-NATO cooperation] is a positive moment. The coalition was breaking there for 13 years. We remember very well the situation our troops found themselves in at the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border. This is why the stabilization in Afghanistan is very important for us.

RT also cited a recent statement from former U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta that Afghan forces are currently providing security across three-quarters of the country's territory.

Panetta stressed, however, that the withdrawal of U.S. military forces did not mean that Americans were leaving Afghanistan completely, and that the United States would continue to provide aid and training to the Afghanistan's government and military forces.

A little-known detail revealed in the *RT* report was that the Pentagon has for several years been buying Russian weapons, including helicopters, for Afghan military forces. Furthermore, Russia has agreed to open a NATO logistics base on its territory to facilitate cargo deliveries to Afghanistan from Western Europe. (A report from Bloomberg on May 8, 2012 stated that the U.S. Army has a \$375-million contract to buy 21 Russian-made MI-17 helicopters for the Afghans from Rosoboronexport, Russia's state-run arms trader. The report noted that the arrangement was criticized by some who noted that Russia is also a top arms supplier to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad.)

[The Christian Science Monitor](#) reported statements from Russian experts denying that Russia's latest overture is an attempt to overcome its defeat in Afghanistan, which some compare to the U.S. experience in Vietnam. Instead, they say, Russia's new role will be limited to commercial obligations,



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negotiated with NATO before it pulls most of its forces out, and will not involve any active military role. “Someone has to help the Afghan people build a peaceful life. They’ve known nothing but weapons and war for so long,” the *Monitor* quoted Oleg Tikhonov — deputy head of the Injured Afghan War Veterans in Sverdlovsk region, western Siberia — as saying.

“But Russia must never repeat its past mistakes. There cannot again be any Russian troops in Afghanistan. After the past, it would be impossible to explain why Russian boys are dying there. You cannot do such things without the people’s consent,” Tikhonov added.

The *Monitor* noted that observers of Russia’s international policies have identified two goals for Afghanistan:

First, since Russian-made weapons have been in abundance in Afghanistan since the days of the Soviet occupation, and have most of weaponry used by the Afghan security forces, it was more practical for the United States and NATO to continue to purchase weapons from Russia. Therefore, Russia sees a practical (and profitable) opportunity to continue to service these weapons.

Russia’s second goal is to establish a deterrent to future militant Islamist insurgents, who may infiltrate Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal. (Similar Islamist incursions created havoc in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan after the break-up of the Soviet Union.) Some Russians fear that the U.S. withdrawal may leave a power vacuum that will be filled by militant Islamists who will foment instability on Russia’s southern border.

“Look at Iraq. The US lost interest in it, and nobody cares if it’s becoming engulfed in civil war,” the *Monitor* quoted Vadim Kozyulin, identified as a researcher with the PIR Center, a leading Moscow security think tank. Kozyulin continued,

The same process may happen in Afghanistan, and could develop much more quickly. The US effort in Afghanistan is about to end. It’s time for Russia to design a new effort, which means we have to take a share of responsibility on ourselves. We’re already playing the role of political and military leader in Central Asia.... Even though [President Vladimir] Putin previously said we won’t send Russian specialists to Afghanistan, the Russian military now says we might create enterprises on Afghan territory to service military equipment. The situation is changing.

In an article in the [Winnipeg Free Press](#) for April 3, foreign policy writer J. Dana Stuster quoted from the Russian Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* last November:

“It’s obvious that Moscow’s interest after the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan ... will increase dramatically,” wrote Lyuba Lulko. “The country has always been in the zone of Soviet and Russian interests.”

Stuster observed that *Pravda* spun the 10-year (1979-1989) Soviet occupation in a more favorable light than most impartial observers remember it: “After what the Americans leave in Afghanistan, the Soviet presence seems to be a blessing. Soviet soldiers are remembered with respect.”

An honest review of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan tells a different story, a story that the Afghan people undoubtedly remember well. In this writer’s article for the print edition of *The New American* on December 8, 1986, “Bleeding Afghanistan,” we wrote:

The women and children injured in Afghanistan are no mere accidental casualties, as are usually suffered by civilians living in a war zone. Even veteran Soviet watchers are appalled by a deliberate policy of military action directed specifically against Afghan civilians that can only be called



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genocide. (Needless to say, Soviet ratification of the Genocide Treaty does not impress these Afghan victims.)

Robert James Bidinotto reported in the newsletter *On Principle* (December 10, 1984):

They look like toys.

They lie on the ground where they are scattered by the helicopters: colorfully painted pens, birds, butterflies, wagons. And when the children touch the toys, they explode. The explosions are not powerful enough to kill in most cases — just powerful enough to maim.

We also quoted from an article entitled “Changes in Soviet Strategy” in the *Free Afghanistan Report* (September 1985), in which it was noted:

Terror, too, is a traditional Soviet weapon. In three small villages near Qandahar last year, the Soviets killed close to 350 women and children in retaliation for a mujahidin attack in the vicinity. After slitting the throats of children, disemboweling pregnant women, raping, shooting and mutilating others, the Russians poured a substance on the bodies which caused instant decomposition.

We have often questioned the wisdom of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, from an American perspective. Regardless of that folly, however, there is little chance that the Afghan people will remember the Soviet occupiers as “a blessing” or cast the Americans who served there in such a fearsome role. The Afghan people would also be wise to be wary of any Russian involvement in their nation, especially considering Vladimir Putin’s KGB history with the old Soviet regime. As heirs of the old Soviet regime, once the Russians get a foothold in Afghanistan, they may decide not to leave.



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