

U.S.-Russia Cooperation on Afghanistan: An Exception or a Model?

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Long before the tragic events of September 2001, Afghanistan presented one of the rare cases of U.S.-Russia active bilateral cooperation on a regional security problem. This intensifying cooperation on Afghanistan ranked as a notable exception in the general context of troubled relations between the two states in key issue areas ranging from strategic arms control to human rights to regional conflict management, especially in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and in the post-Soviet space, where the list of disagreements sometimes seemed to be even broader than during the Cold War. The forms of U.S.-Russia cooperation on Afghanistan were varied: including pressure to force the Taliban, the country's de facto government, to change its policies on terrorism and narcotics; UN sanctions; and a bilateral working group with a focus on terrorist threats coming from Afghanistan. Even prior to September 2001 and the political and military aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States, this atypical cooperation on a regional security problem had provoked both political and academic interest as to the factors that were wielding major influences on this process.

Both Russia and the United States have been key international players in the region. This was reflected by their role as the only two "outside" powers in the UN-sponsored "6+2" contact group, which was formed in 1998 with Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and China, to discuss the prospects for ending the civil war in Afghanistan. Additionally, both have used Afghanistan (the Soviet Union directly and the United States indirectly) as a Cold War playground; both have been seriously considering the "terrorist threat" coming from Afghanistan; as permanent members of the UN Security Council, both have been the most active advocates of sanctions against the Taliban, despite disagreements with some other members; and both have resorted or threatened to resort to the use of force against targets in Afghanistan, if necessary, with the United States bombing Osama bin Laden's "terrorist bases" in 1998 and Russia threatening missile attacks in 2000. Russia has been able to compensate for the United States' disproportionate international weight and influence in part by its vast experience in and relative proximity to the region and by the fact that the civil war in Afghanistan presented a more pressing and immediate security concern for the Russian forces in Tajikistan, if not for Russia itself. Both Moscow and Washington had a vested interest in the Northern Alliance keeping control over the approximately 5–10 percent of Afghanistan territory that it held. The resistance of Afghanistan's Tajiks, until recently led by the charismatic Massoud, against the Pushtun-dominated Taliban served for Russia as an important instrument for the stabilization of Tajikistan and for the United States as

one of the safeguards against the revival of Pakistan's Pushtun problem, where the Pushtun make up approximately 13 percent of the population.

It is, however, on the wider counterterrorism aspect of the problem, which has important foreign policy and domestic implications for both states, that cooperation has been the closest in the recent years. In 2000, Presidents Clinton and Putin agreed to form a bilateral working group on Afghanistan specifically to complement U.S. and Russian counterterrorist efforts.

For the United States, it was the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, allegedly instigated by bin Laden, that appeared to stimulate a revival of policy on the situation in Afghanistan. Afghanistan had not been on the primary agenda for the United States since the fall of Najibullah's government in 1992, in part because internecine warfare was considered endemic there. In the following years, what often seemed the United States' single-minded "get Osama bin Laden" approach to Afghanistan could be understood only through the prism of wider U.S. security interests and concerns, with international terrorism emerging as one of the important post-Cold War substitutes for traditional security threats. The diffused and fragmented nature of this new threat, which is not always easy to grasp, to trace, or to target, has created a strong imperative to search for a single mastermind—a role effectively played by bin Laden and his terrorist organization Al Qaeda. Thus the United States' preoccupation with bin Laden has effectively served policy purposes often unrelated to the situation in Afghanistan per se. This was partly reflected by the fact that, while the nature and form of U.S. demands made it difficult for the Taliban to surrender bin Laden for internal reasons, the United States, until recently, was not recognizing the Taliban as a terrorist organization and maintained unofficial contacts with Afghanistan's de facto rulers.

For Russia, which has also declared the struggle against international terrorism as one of its top foreign policy priorities, the greatest challenge, related to the situation in Afghanistan, was not as much the unlikely direct cross-border military attack by the Taliban into the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, as it was the so-called Islamic threat—the potential of the Taliban's successes to stimulate the rise of radical Islam in Central Asian states, thus aiding directly or indirectly radical Islamic movements in challenging local regimes.

Overall, it was a combination of some common concerns, specific to the situation in Afghanistan, and wider overlapping interests, such as the counterterrorism implications, that made both the United States and Russia seek to get the most out of their cooperation on Afghanistan—a task that became particularly important, given the many controversies over other security issues.

With the U.S. retaliation campaign in response to the September terrorist attacks in the offing, the question of whether U.S.–Russia cooperation on Afghanistan is a case-specific phenomenon or a litmus test for Russia's future cooperation with the West, both in confronting terrorism and in resolving other conflicts across Eurasia, is now more relevant than ever.

An answer to this question, however, largely depends on the character and scale of the U.S. retaliation campaign, as well as on its international political and legal framework. Among other things, the September 2001 attacks have demonstrated that the world's superpower is confronted with a prospect of becoming an object of manipulation by hostile forces. It is a certainty that those who arranged the attacks on September 11, 2001 anticipated that the United States would respond militarily. Moreover, the policy-driven massive military operation by the United States against predictable targets in Muslim-dominated regions of the world could have been the attackers' primary goal. Any disproportionate and inaccurate unilateral military action against "appointed culprit" states—an action that has the potential of seriously destabilizing the situation not only in the states under attack, but in the adjacent regions as well—could create more security problems than it is meant to solve, stimulate backlash aggressive acts from forces hostile to the United States, and lead to the erosion of the wide international consensus in favor of the United States. While this time, U.S. unilateralism is unlikely to be openly disputed, as the case for self-defense can be justified, the need to counter international terrorism now requires, more than ever, multilateral solutions that should not be limited to the use of military force. In a longer-term perspective, the world cannot afford its leader, the United States, to become another Israel—a "fortress state" whose active and effective unilateral counterterrorist measures seem largely irrelevant to the underlying problems fueling terrorism.

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