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## Russia needs the US in Afghanistan

By Salman Wattoo

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In today's world, geopolitics takes precedence over ideologies. The US-Iran nuclear deal reached last year is a very recent example of how two countries with ideologies on different ends of the spectrum can come together to achieve their political objectives.

The Richard Nixon-Chairman Mao alliance in the early 1970s or the US-Soviet accord during World War II are other examples that show how geopolitics take precedence over ideologies. In the coming months, the world may yet see another strategic shift in policy. This time, in an arrangement between the US and Russia over Afghanistan.

Russia faces serious threats to its stability from Islamic insurgencies. Recent suicide blasts in Volgograd were a painful reminder of this.

Historically, Russia has tried to suppress Islamic movements (also religious activities in general) not only in Russia but also in Central Asian states (especially in the time of the Soviet Union).

The failure of such policies led to the rise of Islamism in Central Asia (especially in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia has continued to provide support to Central Asian governments to fight Islamic insurgencies as it considers Central Asian countries as buffers states between it and the Islamic world.

Some of these insurgent groups, most importantly the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan, is allied with the Afghan Taliban.

It is important to note here that the border between Afghanistan and Central Asian states (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) are quite porous. Until the beginning of the 19th century, amid the Great Game between the British and Russian empires, these borders were almost non-existent, and this explains the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan and cultural links between Afghans and Central Asians.

The Great Game made Afghanistan a buffer zone between the two empires and established the state's modern borders. These borders were closed for decades in the 20th century but links between Afghans and the Central Asians were never cut off due to the nature of the terrain and strong links between the people.

In that sense, what happens in Afghanistan, deeply concerns Russia. At the moment, uncertainty regarding Afghanistan's future runs high with the withdrawal date of Western forces coming closer day by day (especially after recent fall of Fallujah's to Islamic State of Iraq and Lebanon).

The worst case scenario for the Russians, after the withdrawal, will be a complete take over by the Taliban. Chances of such an immediate takeover by the Taliban are very low. However, in the absence of foreign support, it is not unthinkable that after the withdrawal, that the Taliban will take over Afghanistan in few years.

The Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) has made some gains in recent years but their capability in absence of foreign funding and support is not clear, there has also been an increasing number of deaths, causing an impact on the morale of ANSF. Meanwhile, the Taliban on the other hand are patient and organized. They can make slow gains, gaining more support with every victory and moving towards a dominant position in Afghanistan.

This will have a direct impact on Russia's buffer zones. It will be only a matter of time before the Taliban will make their way to neighboring countries to aid Islamic insurgents. Russia will naturally aid the governments and secular elements causing more and more resentment against Russia, not only in Central Asia, but also in the wider Muslim world (including Muslims living in Russia).

And it will not be long before Russia is directly hit by wave of attacks similar to those of Volgograd, perhaps even worse.

The only possible way for Russia to avoid this is to convince the international community to continue to its support for Afghanistan and ANSF, which is not going to be possible unless Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, signs the bilateral treaty with the Americans allowing them to keep certain bases and portion of its forces in Afghanistan.

Although it is widely believed that the contract will be eventually signed, with every passing day there are increasing spats between the Afghans and the Americans.

The Russians, here can play a very important role; they have strong ties with Afghanistan from the Soviet era and also through supporting groups that fought the Taliban after the fall of the Soviet Union.

They can help the Americans convince the Afghans to sign the agreement. By doing so they will be indirectly facilitating the peace talks with Taliban and will have to come to terms with the Taliban having some power in the Afghan power structure. But this is the only way peace can be achieved.

Even though these bases can potentially be used by Americans in future against the Russians, for anything from running spy network to influencing Afghan policies towards Russia, Moscow may conclude that the US are essential to keep Taliban out of a dominant position and hence keeping Russia's vital geopolitical interests safe. This convergence of interests between American and Russians can cause a strategic shift of alliances.

This is an interesting situation that the Chinese may view with suspicion. They most certainly want to keep the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan, but at the same time like Moscow they are keen to benefit from the natural resources in the country.