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Russia Pulls Back From Cooperating With U.S. on Afghanistan

By MUJIB MASHAL and ANDREW E. KRAMER

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For all the conflicts in the world in which Washington is at odds with Moscow, the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan has been one area where the Obama administration's interests and Russia's concerns coincide.

Disputes over the wars in Ukraine and Syria had not stopped the governments from cooperating on counternarcotics and securing military supply lines. But after initial success on those fronts, Russia now seems to be disengaging with both the United States and the American-backed Afghan government.

On an old Cold War battlefield where Russia fought a nearly decade-long war against United States-supplied fighters, Moscow has a new strategy: the cold shoulder.

"We won't join the useless events, and we've already told the Americans," President Vladimir V. Putin's envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir N. Kabulov, told Russian state news media this month. Russia, he said, would sit out any talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government in Kabul, backed by the United States, Pakistan and China.

Honestly speaking, we're already tired of joining anything Washington starts," Mr. Kabulov said. The Kremlin, he added, "has no desire to participate in what the Americans organize 'on the fly' just for their own pre-election interests and where they give us the role of extras on the set."

The government of Mr. Putin has instead decided to address on its own what it sees as the immediate security threat from the chaos in Afghanistan and the emergence there of militants other than the Taliban, especially those from the Islamic State.

Russia has reinforced its largest foreign military base in Tajikistan, along the border with Afghanistan, and the Russian military has held regular exercises with Tajik soldiers. The Kremlin has committed \$1.2 billion to train and equip the Tajik Army, forming a new bulwark in Central Asia north of Afghanistan.

Mr. Kabulov also recently disclosed that Russia had opened direct channels to the Taliban to exchange information about militants in northern Afghanistan allied with the Islamic State. (The Taliban have denied being in touch with Moscow.)

Afghan officials worry that a breakdown of consensus among the international powers with an interest in Afghanistan, and the establishment of direct contacts with those governments and the insurgent Taliban, would undermine the government in Kabul.

They are also concerned that the Russian government's recent moves are motivated by forces outside their control, such as a lack of a clear American strategy and Mr. Putin's tense relationship with the United States.

"Bilaterally, we have struggled to convince the Russians on certain issues because they increasingly see us only as part of this larger game with the United States," said one senior Afghan official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear his comments would further stoke the mistrust in Moscow.

The Kremlin's recent moves are seen as a shift from the role Russia played during 14 years of NATO presence in Afghanistan — one of guarded cooperation marked by frequent contradictions.

Even as Moscow was alarmed by the presence of nearly 140,000 Western troops in its backyard, often deriding the mission as a failure, Mr. Putin's government was happy to let the American-led coalition contain the common threats posed by Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and by drugs, of which Afghanistan produced plenty that are trafficked and consumed in Russia.

In a little more than a year since the end of the NATO combat mission in Afghanistan, the fighting here has intensified, shifting to the north along the 1,250-mile border with three Central Asian states Russia still considers as its underbelly. The Taliban briefly overran the city of Kunduz last fall.

The top American general here offered contradictory statements about the insurgent group. In a hearing at the Senate Armed Services Committee this month, the commander of United States and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Gen. John F. Campbell, said, "Our country has made a decision that we are not at war with the Taliban." Just days later in Kabul, he said the Taliban were the enemy.

The Russian government does not fear a direct threat from the Taliban as much as it is worried about Central Asian fighters who could use Afghanistan as a staging ground to penetrate Russia's borders. One group of particular concern is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, some factions of which have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Afghan officials have also reported the presence of militants from Tajikistan, Chechnya and Chinese Uighurs, many who relocated to Afghanistan from Pakistan's tribal areas.

Fighting drug trafficking rings that partially fund the Afghan insurgency had been an area of common interest for the Russians and the Americans, said Yuri V. Krupnov, an adviser to the head of Russia's antidrug agency, Viktor P. Ivanov. But that stopped when the United States Treasury Department in 2014 imposed sanctions on Mr. Ivanov, a close associate of Mr. Putin's.

"Washington had no dialogue with us, and just asserted its interests and sovereignty, and was uninterested in the views of Russia or anybody else," Mr. Krupnov said, adding, "The Obama administration buried this promising line of cooperation. All room for cooperation is exhausted."

The alliance between the foreign militants in Afghanistan may not be as threatening as Russia fears. In Badakhshan Province, the number of foreign fighters is estimated to be about 500, some traveling with their families, Taliban commanders there say. The largest group is Tajik fighters, followed by Uzbeks from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Chechens and Uighurs have a smaller presence.

The militants from Central Asia have been problematic to their Afghan Taliban guests, the local commanders say, because they use harsher methods, and, somewhat scandalously, are more relaxed in how they observe Islam. On top of all of that, the local Taliban have grown furious that some of their guests have recently warmed toward the Islamic State, which they see as intruding on their turf.

"The Quetta Shura insisted that we treat them nicely, that they need our cooperation, but they have a lot of shortcomings," said Malawi Amanuddin, the Taliban's shadow governor in Badakhshan. "They say they are waging jihad, but their women here walk around not covering themselves according to Islamic hijab."

It is these internal rifts, perhaps, that have encouraged Russian officials to explore their channels directly with the Taliban and drive a wedge deeper between the militants who threaten Russia and their Afghan hosts.

"The official position, and this is from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is that Russia is risking a lot and has nothing to gain" from cooperating with the United States, Aleksei V. Malashenko, a researcher at the Carnegie center in Moscow, said in a telephone interview. "We couldn't agree

on Georgia, on Ukraine and on Syria; why get involved in another conflict where we cannot agree?” he said, describing the Russian position as “let the Americans boil.”