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Why Russia Wants the US to Stay in Afghanistan

Moscow would like to avoid having to militarily intervene itself.

By Samuel Ramani
August 23, 2017

On August 15, 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, urged the United States to withdraw its military presence from Afghanistan and end its 16-year campaign to stabilize the war-torn country. Kabulov's fierce condemnations of the U.S. war in Afghanistan were praised by senior members of the Russian upper house, like Senator Alexey Pushkov, who claimed that the United States lost the war in Afghanistan due to Bush's reckless use of force and Obama's inability to end the war in a timely fashion.

Even though Russian policymakers have scathingly criticized the U.S. war in Afghanistan, a closer examination of Moscow's Afghanistan strategy reveals that Russia's strategic interests are furthered by the retention of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Despite his recent statements to the contrary, Kabulov accepted this geopolitical reality in a January 2017 interview with *Interfax* where he stated that "everything would collapse" in Afghanistan if the United States withdrew troops from the conflict zone.

In light of Kabulov's previous assessment, U.S. President Donald Trump's August 21 decision to expand counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan aids Russia's efforts to stabilize the country in two critical ways. First, Trump's decision to maintain a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan allows Russia to influence the security situation in Afghanistan through diplomatic pressure on Washington, rather than through the deployment of its own military personnel. Second, Russian

policymakers believe that an expanded U.S. military presence in Afghanistan will prevent the Taliban from further expanding its territory and steer the Taliban towards embracing Russia's vision for a political resolution of the Afghanistan war.

The Trump administration's decision to send an unspecified number of additional troops to Afghanistan benefits Russian interests, as it ensures that counterterrorism operations can be effectively conducted in the country without the deployment of Russian troops. Even though Russia has confined its involvement in Afghanistan to multilateral diplomacy, and arms sales to disparate political factions, Kremlin policymakers have become increasingly willing to debate the efficacy of troop deployments to Afghanistan.

Public statements from senior Russian and Central Asian policymakers have further increased speculation about the prospect of a Russian military intervention in Afghanistan. On June 28, Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambaev called for the establishment of a new Russian military base to protect Kyrgyzstan from the Taliban's growing influence in Afghanistan. These concerns were echoed by Kabulov's recent declaration that ISIS's growing presence in Afghanistan could force Moscow to deploy military personnel to the war-ravaged country.

Notwithstanding Kabulov's increasingly belligerent rhetoric, a Russian military intervention in Afghanistan remains a highly undesirable outcome. As retired Afghan air force general Atiqullah Amarkhel noted in a recent interview, senior Russian generals believe that a military intervention in Afghanistan would overextend Moscow's defensive capabilities and divert valuable resources from Russia's ongoing air support for Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria.

The pernicious legacies of the 1979-1988 Soviet War in Afghanistan also ensure that Russian troop deployments are likely to be met with fierce public resistance. As the director of Moscow's Levada Center Lev Gudkov told me in a 2015 interview, the Russian public's apathy towards political crises in the Middle East and South Asia is an enduring consequence of Moscow's ill-fated military intervention in Afghanistan.

In this context, a Russian military intervention in Afghanistan is likely to command little popular support, unless there is a major terror attack on Russian soil that can be demonstrably linked to instability in Afghanistan. Therefore, Putin's Afghanistan strategy remains premised on influencing Washington's Afghanistan policy through indirect means, instead of deploying Russian military personnel to Afghanistan.

A key element of Russia's indirect pressure strategy in Afghanistan is credibly invoking the threat of a military retaliation or counter-deployment if Washington's Afghanistan strategy fails to accommodate Moscow's security concerns. The Trump administration's desire to avoid Russia-U.S. proxy war in Afghanistan could convince the U.S. military to address issues of strategic importance to Russia as it attempts to resolve Afghanistan's political crisis.

By threatening a military retaliation, Russian officials believe that they can convince the U.S. military to aggressively crack down on the traffic of unmarked planes that provide weapons to ISIS and step up efforts to curb the flow of illegal drugs into the CIS region. As the Trump administration is seeking to prevent revenues from Afghanistan's illegal drug trade from

reaching the Taliban and to combat terrorism in Afghanistan, Russia's indirect pressure strategy could eventually provide a foundation for tactical cooperation on issues of shared importance.

The United States' increasingly aggressive efforts to rollback the Taliban's territorial expansion also benefit Russia's interests, even though Russia has strengthened its diplomatic and military partnership with the Sunni extremist organization in recent months. Containing the Taliban's territorial reach furthers Moscow's long-term interests, as stagnant progress or defeats on the battlefield could convince the Taliban's senior leadership to accept Russia's proposals for a political resolution of the Afghanistan war.

The Trump administration's new Afghanistan strategy is also appealing to Russian policymakers, as Moscow remains concerned about the Taliban's links to terrorist networks. Russian security services routinely arrest individuals on Russian soil suspected of colluding with the Taliban, and the Russian Supreme Court designated the Taliban as a terrorist organization since February 2003.

If the United States increases its pressure on Pakistan to give up its links to the Taliban, Washington could help preserve Russia's balancing strategy in South Asia. As India views the Taliban as an instrument of Pakistani power projection in Afghanistan, New Delhi is likely to strengthen its economic and security cooperation with Kabul to stymie the Taliban's path to military victory.

Had Trump failed to pressure Pakistan on its links to regional terror networks, Moscow might have been forced to unilaterally distance itself from Islamabad to reassure New Delhi of its continued reliability as a security partner. This scenario could have been damaging for Russia's security, as Pakistan maintains close links to Sunni extremists in Chechnya, and can retaliate against Russia if Moscow-Islamabad ties become strained over Afghanistan. By contrast, if Trump's Afghanistan strategy is implemented in full and U.S.-Pakistan security cooperation increases, Russia will likely be able to avert a potential diplomatic conflict with Pakistan.

Even though Kremlin officials have frequently criticized Washington's handling of the Afghan security crisis and have urged the U.S. to withdraw from Afghanistan, a closer examination of Russia's strategic interests reveals that Trump's new Afghanistan strategy could help consolidate Russia's role as a major stakeholder in Afghanistan. Therefore, Russian policymakers are likely to grudgingly accept Trump's decision to maintain and selectively expand Washington's military presence in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future.