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Russia's Puzzling Role in Afghan Theater

Written by Warren Mass

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On February 5, we reported about the fate of the U.S. air base at Manas, Kyrgyzstan, which has played a key role in supplying the heavily American NATO forces in the ongoing military operation in Afghanistan — an operation that promises to expand into an ongoing war in the model of Iraq.

During a visit to Afghanistan on January 10, then-Vice President-elect Joseph Biden met with Gen. David McKiernan, the commander of the NATO-led forces in the nation. Gen. McKiernan told Mr. Biden that more helicopters, engineers, military police, and other resources would be needed for 20-30,000 additional U.S. troops projected to be sent to Afghanistan later this year, according to U.S. military spokesman Col. Greg Julian.

It is an established principle of warfare that controlling supply lines is essential. Relating this principle to the expansion of the war in Afghanistan makes the creation of additional supply lines into the landlocked nation imperative, especially after the route by which as much as 80 percent of supplies bound for the Afghan conflict — the Khyber Pass through the mountains from Pakistan — has been subjected to more frequent attack. On February 2, Taliban-backed militants blew up a 32-foot Khyber Pass bridge, temporarily cutting off that key supply route. In addition to the destruction of the bridge, the militants have in recent months shot at and hijacked convoys and have destroyed more than 300 trucks and Humvees in at least five attacks.

With Afghanistan bordered by Iran to the west, the best alternative source for supplies to be brought into the nation (other than from Pakistan) are through the five former Soviet republics to the north: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The importance of Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan was underscored on December 11, when Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates made a stop at the base on his way to Afghanistan. While at the base, Gates told U.S. troops: "The final decision on increasing U.S. forces in Afghanistan] will be made by the next president [Obama], but a consensus has emerged that more troops are needed."

As noted in our January 21 article "[Petraeus Prepares for Afghan Military Buildup](#)," General David Petraeus, commander of the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) in the Middle East, made stops in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, on his way to meet with Afghan President Hamid Karzai on January 20-21. Before that meeting, Petraeus announced that arrangements had been made to establish new transport routes into Afghanistan from the central Asian region where those nations are located.

Two days later, speaking to reporters from Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, where he had been having talks with Uzbek President Islam Karimov, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said that his government is receptive to cooperation with the United States and NATO in opening up new supply routes. (Uzbekistan expelled U.S. troops from the base on its territory in 2005 in a dispute over human rights issues, leaving Manas as the only U.S. military facility in the immediate region.)

"Let us hope the new U.S. administration will be more successful in the Afghan settlement than its predecessor," said Medvedev. "We are ready for fully fledged and equal cooperation on security in Afghanistan, including with the United States. We are ready to work on the most complicated issues ... including the transit of nonmilitary goods."

On February 4 — the day after hosting Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who announced that his government had decided to shut down the U.S. air base at Manas — Medvedev, speaking on state channel Vesti-24, repeated his overture, saying that Moscow and its allies "are ready for full-fledged, comprehensive cooperation" with the United States on stabilizing Afghanistan. This despite the fact that most observers cannot dismiss the timing of Bakiyev's announcement about closing the U.S. base and his meeting with Medvedev as sheer coincidence.

"Russia and other CSTO [Collective Security Treaty Organization] members are ready for full-fledged, comprehensive cooperation with the United States and other coalition members in fighting terrorism in the region," Medvedev told reporters, according to the AP. "This fight must be comprehensive and include both military and political components. Only in this case will there be a chance to succeed."

The Russian president continued: "It is necessary to form a full-fledged political system, keeping in mind, cultural and historic traditions. Democracy cannot be forced upon [a country]. It must grow from within, It's not the number of bases that matters. It would be

good if that would help reduce the number of terrorists, but the fight against terrorism is not limited to building up military forces."

As Medvedev was issuing conciliatory language for the benefit of the United States, the CSTO held a summit in Moscow, where its participants — Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan — agreed to set up a joint rapid reaction force of about 10,000 men to function under a central command. Russia's envoy to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, said that Kyrgyzstan may host some of the newly formed rapid reaction forces at the Manas base currently housing the U.S. military.

AP writer Vladimir Isachenkov has theorized that Russia may use the status of the Manas base as a bargaining chip in Russia's dealings with the United States, and that Russia may hope to win concessions from the Obama administration regarding the planned deployment of a U.S. missile shield system in Eastern Europe and NATO's eastward expansion.

A Bloomberg News report seconded this view, citing Andranik Migranyan, director of the New York-based Institute for Democracy and Cooperation (described as "a Russian institute director with ties to senior officials in Moscow"), who reiterated that Russian cooperation on Afghanistan may be linked to resolving differences over issues such as missile defense and NATO expansion to include Ukraine and Georgia.

An interesting aspect of relations between the United States and Russia as these events were transpiring was a telephone conversation between U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov on February 2. Reuters news cited a statement from Russia's Foreign Ministry that said of the conversation: "In the course of the discussion, the accent was given to the mutual interest of building a positive agenda for our relations after the arrival of the new U.S. administration." Also: "Especially noted was the importance of strengthening bilateral cooperation, including questions of strategic dialogue and economic cooperation, as well as current international problems such as the resolution of [the situation in] Afghanistan."

As to how to interpret Russia's diplomacy vis-à-vis the United States, it bears well to keep these important points in mind:

- Since the supposed collapse of the Soviet Union, all of the key centers of power — political, economic, military, intelligence — in Russia and the other "former" Soviet states have remained in the hands of lifelong Communists. Medvedev's mentor, Vladimir Putin, joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union while he was a law student at Leningrad State University. He joined the KGB while young and served the Soviet spy agency until 1991. In 1998 President Boris Yeltsin appointed Putin head of the FSB (one of the successor agencies to the KGB). In 1999, Yeltsin appointed Putin acting prime minister of the Government of the Russian Federation. Putin was elected president in 2000 and was reelected in 2004. Unable to serve for a third term, Putin was replaced by his hand-picked successor, Dmitry Medvedev, who subsequently appointed Putin prime minister of Russia.

- Though Russian cooperation with the United States concerning Afghanistan is usually attributed to the nation's (as the USSR) prior costly war in Afghanistan — and subsequent "fear" of radical Islamic militarism — the most radical Muslim groups have long subsisted on Soviet-Russian support. For example, shortly after Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed at the Arab-Cairo Summit in 1964, the group began sending hundreds of recruits to terrorist training camps in the Soviet Union, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Cuba. For years, Arafat's chief contact in the Soviet Union was Vladimir Buljakov, head of the Soviet Foreign Ministry's Middle East Department. In a 1982 speech to a Soviet delegation visiting Beirut, Arafat stated: "We look to you, comrade, the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party and the socialist bloc, full of hope, as friend to friend ... in considering the question of liberation and progress in the world."

Former KGB agents and current SVR/FSB/GRU agents in Russia still maintain connections within the Islamic terrorist network. In this writer's opinion, if the key players who control Russia appear to be lending a helping hand to Americans to engage themselves deeper into the Middle East imbroglio, it is likely that they are as "sincere" as their Soviet predecessor who "considerately" walked out of the United Nations Security Council in feigned protest just before the start of the Korean War. During his absence, the Security Council voted to commit the United Nations to a "police action" action in Korea that drained the United States of men and resources, and has kept us militarily entangled in that country to this day. Had the Soviet delegate been present, he would have been expected to veto this supposed action against a Soviet satellite, North Korea.

The Soviets/Russians have always been more than willing to facilitate the sending of more U.S. soldiers to die in yet another no-win war. So if they cooperate in helping us ferry more men and materiel to Afghanistan — a country they know only too well — it should surprise no one.