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Russia has 'Chechnya' ploy for Afghanistan

By Dmitry Shlapentokh
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With the administration of United States President Barack Obama treating the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan as a priority, given the resurgence of the Taliban, Russia has become an important player in the region.

Moscow has indicated its apparent support for the US by allowing the transit of supplies for Afghanistan through its territory. On the other hand, the decision by the government in Kyrgyzstan to close the US base at Manas is attributed to Russian pressure.

There therefore remains a widespread perception in the West that Russia is enjoying the US's struggles in Afghanistan, given the history of the Soviet Union's quagmire in that country during the 1980s.

There might be some truth in this, but Russia has a compelling reason to be involved in Afghanistan. This is not because of any grand ideas of empire-building; rather it is to be prepared for the possibility of the US's failure there.

A considerable segment of the Russian elite is not anti-American, and even less so anti-European. Their main concern is the Muslim East.

Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's representative at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), emphasized this point in a recent interview in which he said that the US's defeat in Afghanistan would be "a great catastrophe for Russia" as Islamists would immediately spread across [Central Asia](#) and the Caucasus. [He added that the US presence in Afghanistan was in Russia's best interests, implying that the best outcome was if the US stayed there indefinitely.](#)

However, Rogozin said he doubted the US would stay long enough to finish the job. It is at this point that what is now a newly emerging military force comprising Russia and several other, mostly Central Asian states, is supposed to step in to keep the Islamists at bay.

Such a military force is problematic, though.

Belarus, for example, is a member of the new arrangement and is supposedly one of the strongest Russian allies - the countries recently signed an agreement for joint air defense.

But President Alexander Lukashenko has made it clear that Belarus will not send any troops outside the country's borders, and he has engaged in an open flirtation with anti-Russian Ukraine as well as the European Union.

President Imomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan is also wavering, apparently upset by the thousands of Tajik workers expelled from Russia due to the economic crisis. He has indicated that he might not participate in the alliance at all, and might even close the Russian base in Tajikistan and invite the Americans instead.

Islam Karimov, the mercurial leader of Uzbekistan, known for his constant vacillation between Russia and the West, has proclaimed that he would send troops, but only on a case-by-case basis.

Russia is clearly a long way from building a force of any note, if at all, and Moscow, acutely aware of this, has another plan, which is drawn from the template adopted successfully in Chechnya.

This involves establishing a sphere of influence in northern Afghanistan, where the major ethnic groups are Uzbeks and Tajiks, unlike the Pashtuns that dominate other parts of the country and which support the Taliban. Under the Northern Alliance led by the legendary Ahmad Shah Massoud, a pocket in the north held out against the Taliban during its years in power from 1996-2001.

In Chechnya, Moscow tamed nationalist Chechens by dishing out considerable largesse to President Ramzan Kadyrov. This included not only money but a huge mosque erected in the capital Grozny. The resistance was steadily incorporated into Kadyrov's forces; and Akhmed Zakaev, the leader of the virtual Chechen government in exile, has even implied he might return.

This would pit Kadyrov, as Moscow's proxy, against Chechen rebel leader Dokka Umarov's Caucasus Emirate jihadis. If this happens, it would mark the transformation of Chechnya from the major headache of the Kremlin into a major cushion against the jihadi threat.

Similarly, in Afghanistan, Russia could stretch its hand into the north to establish a credible buffer. It is even possible that embattled President Hamid Karzai could be drawn into this circle.