

said that Russian “activity really picked up in the last 18 to 24 months. Prior to that we had not seen this kind of destabilizing activity by Russia here. When you look at the timing it roughly correlates to when things started to heat up in Syria. So it’s interesting to note the timing of the whole thing.”

With this level of accusations being leveled on Russia by the invader itself, there remains little to believe that the invader sincerely wants to offer peace. But the question still is: was the US, with this anti-Russia mindset, really going for peace when it convened the Tashkent conference? Or was it hoping to construct a kind of consensus in the region that would support ending the war but would equally support a long-term, open-ended, US military presence as well?

It is the open-ended military presence in Afghanistan that the US is after, a presence that it can no longer impose without support from key regional players. And, within the key regional players, there are hardly any states, except India, which might support the US; hence, the US efforts to shore it up its diplomatic activity in Central Asia to not only to find support for its presence in Afghanistan but also to establish an alternative route, not depending upon Pakistan and Russia, for its military supplies to Afghanistan.

This has been recently seen with regard to considerably upped co-operation between Central Asia and the European Union, and between Central Asia and the US with regard to sponsoring new regional groupings in what has been called a “5+1” format. And even before the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan, the EU and Central Asian representative had a meeting, which had been held four months after the most recent formal EU-Central Asia Foreign Ministers’ meeting in Samarkand in November 2017, and two weeks after an informal meeting of Central Asian Heads of State in Astana. Unsurprisingly, one of the agenda of this most recent meeting was the “role” that these states could play in bringing “stability” to Afghanistan.

However, within the US calculation, it is Russia which is engaged in a destabilizing activity in Afghanistan. Therefore, if the US and EU are trying to up the Central Asian states’ role in Afghanistan to bring the US version of stability, it logically means that the US and EU are wooing the CAS into anti-Russian regional grouping and thus build the so-called regional consensus and find an alternative supply route as well. This, in turn, is a part of sustained US diplomatic effort to lure the CAS out of the Russian and Chinese orbit.

But the US is unlikely to achieve these objectives. For one thing, Russia has a very strong presence in CAS, and out of its frustration, the US has also accused Tajikistan of smuggling Russian weapons into Afghanistan, reflecting the difficulty of cracking Russia-CAS relations. For another, the CAS states are themselves weary of the increasing presence of ISIS in Afghanistan, known as Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), which, unlike the Taliban, does want to spread into Central Asia and has also established links with the CAS-based Islamist movements such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Thirdly, co-operation with the US would mean having to bear a long-term and open-ended military presence in Afghanistan and an un-ending conflict in their backyard, likely to have strong spill-over effects.

For Central Asia States, co-operation with the US is, therefore, likely to cost a lot more than co-operation with Russia and China in bringing the war to a negotiated end. The US doesn’t want such an end, which means that it wants to prolong the war and keep Russia and China at bay, and which also means the Central Asian states becoming a party to the conflict they should not be directly involved in.

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