

Russia, NATO and Afghanistan: High Stakes Great Game

What did Medvedev have up his sleeve when he welcomed Obama's new surge in Afghanistan

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US President Barack Obama's now expanding war against the Taliban is garnering support from liberals and neocons alike, from leaders around the world, even from Russia. "We are ready to support these efforts, guarantee the transit of troops, take part in economic projects and train police and the military," Russian President Dmitri Medvedev declared in a recent press conference with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Moscow and Washington reached an agreement in July allowing the US to launch up to 4,500 US flights a year over Russia, opening a major supply route for American operations in Afghanistan. Previously Russia had only allowed the US to ship non-lethal military supplies across its territory by train.

So far, Obama has all European governments behind him, if not their people. Despite a solid majority in all countries, from Canada to Europe East and West, who want the troops out now, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was able to deliver pledges from 25 NATO members to send a total of about 7,000 additional forces to Afghanistan next year "with more to come" with nary a dissenting voice. In a macabre statement, Fogh Rasmussen welcomed Obama's surge: "The United States' contribution to the NATO-led mission has always been substantial; it is now even more important."

Explaining the willingness of Euro leaders to ignore their constituents, former US ambassador to NATO and RAND adviser Robert Hunter told the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR): "In terms of motivation, very few European countries believe that winning in Afghanistan — that is, dismantling, defeating, and destroying Al-Qaeda and Taliban — is necessary for their own security. A few believe that, but most do not. When they add forces, it is to protect the credibility of NATO now that it is there. NATO has never failed at anything it chose to do." Part and parcel with this, Europeans want to keep the US "as a European power, not just as an insurance policy but also as the principal manager of Russia's future." He ghoulishly agreed with the CFR interviewer that Afghanistan is a way for Europe to "pay the rent" to the US for continuing to bully Russia.

The combined US and NATO forces will bring together a staggering 150,000 soldiers from more than 50 nations. Every European nation except for Belarus, Cyprus, Malta, Russia and Serbia will have military forces there, as well as nine of the 15 former Soviet republics. Marvels analyst Rick Rozoff, "Troops from five continents, Oceania and the Middle East. Even the putative coalition of the willing stitched together by the US and Britain after the invasion of Iraq only consisted of forces from 31 nations." By way of comparison, in September this year there were 120,000 US troops in Iraq and only a handful of other

nations' personnel. The Soviet Afghan occupation force in the 1980s peaked at 100,000 shortly before beginning to pull out in 1989; the British in 1839 had only 21,000 and in 1878 — 42,000.

The world's last three major wars — Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq — have all been testing grounds for the new, global NATO. Hence the flurry of visits by US officials to prospective members to make sure they sign up for the surge. For instance, Celeste Wallander, US deputy assistant secretary of defence for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia, just returned from a visit to her new friend Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, to thank him for coughing up 40 “peacekeepers” who will start training in Germany in January 2010 before deployment in Afghanistan. As if to up the ante with its nemesis, Azerbaijan promised to double its 90 troops. It would be interesting if the two warring nations' troops were to share barracks. They have far more cause to fight each other than Afghans.

It is hard to imagine this heathen Tower of Babel as an effective force against devoted Muslims ready to die to repel the invaders. But Fogh nonetheless chortles, “With the right resources, we can succeed.” Could it be that one of his “resources” is the “big one”?

What explains Russia's quiescence at Obama's determination to wrest Central Asia from its traditional sphere of influence? Russian suspicions about US intentions are very strong on many fronts. Sucking more than half of the ex-Soviet republics into returning to Afghanistan — this time on the US side — is surely brazen. Continuing to expand NATO eastward is strongly condemned by all Russians and is not popular in either Ukraine or Georgia, but continues nonetheless. Russian intelligence is undoubtedly following US and others' machinations in Chechnya, which continues to be a serious threat to Russian security. Hunter's cynical explanation to the CFR of Euro complicity in the Afghan genocide is not lost on deaf ears.

Yet, Russia dawdles on its assistance to Iran both in nuclear energy and in providing up-to-date defence missiles, clearly at US prompting. And now seems to be happy that Obama is expanding what all sensible analysts insist is a losing and criminal war virtually next door. Is this evidence of Russian weakness, an acceptance of US plans for Eurasian hegemony which could imperil the Russian Federation itself?

Russia is still in transition, caught between a longing to be part of the West and to be a mediator between the Western empire and the rest of the world. Russia's ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, represents this conflict between the “Atlantist” and “Eurasian” vision of Russia's future, terms which have been popularised by Alexandr Dugin. In a TV interview with Russia Today, loose-cannon Rogozin argued: “There is a new civilisation emerging in the Third World that thinks that the white, northern hemisphere has always oppressed it and must therefore fall at its feet now. If the northern civilisation wants to protect itself, it must be united: America, the European Union, and Russia. If they are not together, they will be defeated one by one.”

But Rogozin is not in favour of Russia merely lying down to be walked over by NATO. He would like NATO replaced by a Euro-Russian security treaty. It is no coincidence that just before Obama's announced surge, Russia unveiled a proposal for just such a new pact, which despite talk of “from Vancouver to Vladivostok” would essentially exclude the US and include Russia. It would prevent member states from taking actions which threaten other members, effectively excluding Ukraine and Georgia from NATO and preventing Poland and

the Czech Republic from setting up their beloved US missile bases. Rogozin's Atlantist vision would see NATO defanged, and North America forced to ally with a new, independent Europe, where Russia is now the dominant power.

NATO, of course, will not go quietly into the night — unless its latest venture in Afghanistan fails. So Russia is biting the bullet on this war — for the time being. Just in case Obama was too busy with Oslo to notice, Rogozin warned last week that Russian cooperation over transit of military supplies to Afghanistan could be jeopardised by a failure to take the Russian security treaty proposal seriously. In Washington's worst-case scenario, if its Afghan gamble implodes, not only will it have to take Russia seriously, but so will Europe, giving the Russian Atlantists the opportunity to integrate with Europe without the US breathing down their necks. If by some miracle NATO succeeds in cowing the Afghans and continues to threaten Russia with encirclement, the Eurasians will gain the upper hand, and Russia will build up its BRIC and SCO ties, forced to abandon its dream of joining and leading Europe as the countervailing power to the US empire.

As this intrigue plays itself out, any number of things could tip the apple cart. For example, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, two quarrelsome ex-Soviet republics bordering Afghanistan which are vital to Obama's surge, virtually declared war on each other earlier this month, potentially complicating the shuttling of US materiel to the front. Uzbekistan announced its withdrawal from the Central Asian electricity grid, a move that isolates Tajikistan by making it impossible for the country to import power from other Central Asian states during the cold winter months. The Tajiks threaten to retaliate by restricting water supplies that Uzbekistan desperately need for its cotton sector next summer. Who knows how this will end? At least they haven't any troops in Afghanistan, where, like the Azeris and Armenians, they would be sorely tempted to turn their guns against each other rather than against the hapless Taliban.

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