

Russian airlift to Afghanistan highlights underlying US-Europe tensions

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The sudden arrival of 12 Russian military cargo aircraft at Bagram airfield just north of Kabul last week has underscored the intense behind-the-scenes rivalry now underway between the US and other major powers for a stake in Afghanistan. Having supported Washington's military intervention, each is now seeking, under the guise of humanitarian concern, to establish a presence inside the country to further its interests in resource-rich Central Asia.

According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, the purpose of the airlift was to provide relief aid, including a field hospital, and to rebuild the Russian embassy in Kabul. The huge Ilyushin-76 aircraft, each capable of transporting 40 tonnes of equipment and supplies, landed at Bagram on November 26 and unloaded construction equipment and materials, Health Ministry officials and uniformed relief workers from the Emergencies Ministry.

While Russian officials denied any soldiers were involved, the Emergencies Ministry is a paramilitary body with its own military wing of 70,000 troops. It was formed as a split off from the Defence Ministry after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The landing operation is reported to have taken five hours. A fleet of trailer trucks, supported by fuel tankers and other vehicles, ferried the cargo and personnel into Kabul.

Putin has played down the operation simply saying that it was the first "in the past few years". But no one missed the political significance. Russian officials were back in Kabul for the first time since the Soviet military pulled out in 1989 after a decade of brutal war against various Mujaheddin groups backed and financed by the US.

Putin noted pointedly that Russia's actions had been carried out "on the request and with the assistance of

the Islamic State of Afghanistan"—a reference to the Northern Alliance that now controls Kabul. By mounting the operation on the eve of talks in Bonn over the political future of Afghanistan, Moscow signalled Russian support for the Northern Alliance and its leader Burhanuddin Rabbani, who is still recognised by the UN as the Afghan head of state.

While Russia stopped short of officially recognising the Northern Alliance as the Afghan government, the move threatens to cut across Washington's demand for a "broad-based" administration. The US is insisting that others, including the former king Zahir Shah and various ethnic Pashtun tribal leaders, be part of any new regime alongside the Northern Alliance. Russia, Iran and India have been supporting the Northern Alliance against the Pakistani-backed Taliban since the mid-1990s.

US officials reported that Secretary of State Colin Powell had telephoned Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov after the Russian airlift to warn Moscow against any abrupt diplomatic or military moves that might undermine trust between the US and Russia. Powell urged Moscow to avoid promoting Rabbani as the official leader of Afghanistan. Both Washington and Moscow have attempted to minimise the differences.

Putin gave his backing to the Bush administration's "global war on terrorism," including the go-ahead for the stationing of US military in the Central Asia, as a means of securing Russian interests on other issues, including in Chechnya where Washington had previously criticised Moscow's war against Islamic militants. But support for the US-led war has provoked opposition in ruling circles, particularly among the military top brass, who have warned of the dangers to Russia of the US intervention in the strategic Central Asian region. The airlift is at least in part Putin's

answer to his critics.

A US official quoted in the *Washington Post* noted that last week's airlift was to demonstrate that Moscow wanted "to play some sort of role in post-Taliban Afghanistan". Then, in a remark that is more revealing about Washington's plans, he added: "The Russian are smart enough to know that the important thing is not what happens in Bonn, but what happens on the ground."

The comment bluntly sums up the Bush administration's strategy: to control the military campaign and monopolise the deployment of troops in order to dictate the terms of any political settlement. Washington's refusal to allow other countries to send soldiers in substantial numbers to Afghanistan is already leading to frictions with its European allies, particularly Britain.

Two weeks ago, British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced that up to 6,000 troops would be dispatched to Afghanistan, ostensibly to assist in providing humanitarian aid. Around 100 British commandos landed at Bagram airfield to secure a bridgehead but immediately ran into opposition from the Northern Alliance, which insisted that foreign troops were not necessary.

It became clear from subsequent statements that it was not simply the Northern Alliance but the Bush administration which was opposed to any large-scale deployment of foreign troops—other than from the US. While Blair insisted that there was still "complete agreement" with Washington, his Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, publicly attacked the US for neglecting Afghanistan's humanitarian needs. Blair was subsequently forced to reverse his decision and stand down the troops.

The *Guardian* was quick to point out that while Russian officials were welcomed in Kabul, the Northern Alliance, with the support of the US, had shown "the cold shoulder to the 100 British soldiers shivering at Bagram airbase". Reflecting concerns in the political establishment that Britain was gaining little from the war, the newspaper complained: "Blair's aid-and-rebuilding agenda elicits only tepid American backing, suggesting that his instant and full-throated support for Bush has not quite won the clout he hoped for."

France faces a similar situation. Its first detachment

of about 60 troops left the Istres airbase for Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan in mid-November. They landed in Uzbekistan, where they have been cooling their heels for two weeks, waiting for transport by US helicopter. The group was the advance guard for up to 2,000 French troops being sent to create "favourable conditions" for humanitarian relief. The first French unit was finally airlifted into Mazar-e-Sharif last weekend.

Last Friday, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer made clear that the Bush administration considered the sending of an international "peacekeeping" force as premature. He described the conditions in Afghanistan as "difficult and dangerous" and implied that other foreign troops would only get in the way of US operations. The president "looks forward to the day" that "peacekeepers will be able to arrive," he blandly concluded.

US Central Command spokesman Rear Admiral Craig Quigley confirmed that the US would dictate the terms on which other countries would deploy troops. "Whatever piece they're offering doesn't work at this time. You take them up on their offers at the location and time and manner that fits into the overall fabric of Enduring Freedom," he said.

At the same time as vetoing a large international force, the US has stepped up its own deployment of troops in Afghanistan. The commander of US forces General Tommy Franks said last week that the US may create more bases like the one near Kandahar in southern Afghanistan established by around 900 marines. He announced that a small "rapid reaction force" had been dispatched to Mazar-e-Sharif and that more US combat aircraft were to be sent to either Tajikistan or Kyrgystan, along with a handful of French warplanes.

The US strategy of excluding its so-called allies from Afghanistan, and thus from the spoils of the war, is bound to further exacerbate tensions with Europe.



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