Russia to expand military aid to US occupation of Afghanistan

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Andrei Avetisyan, the Russian ambassador to Kabul, announced July 12 that the Kremlin would begin supplying arms and military equipment to the regime of President Hamid Karzai. The move marks the first time Moscow has provided direct military aid to an Afghan government since Soviet troops withdrew from the country in 1989.

"We confirm our readiness to ship the military equipment to Afghanistan," Avetisyan told China's Xinhua wire service. "So we are ready to cooperate with Afghanistan and NATO unilaterally in this respect."

Days later, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced a package of concessions for Afghanistan during a visit to the country. These include Moscow writing off $900 million in Afghan debts and a promise to maintain an aid program through which Russian wheat is supplied to the country.

"We will also look with partners into additional measures, including the equipping and training of Afghan army and police," Lavrov stated at the international conference on Afghanistan held in Kabul on July 20. "We will expand our contribution to the training of personnel for Afghanistan's power-wielding agencies," he added.

The Kremlin's collaboration with the American occupation of Afghanistan, and support for the puppet Karzai regime in Kabul, has thrown a lifeline to the nearly nine-year US war. Faced with a military debacle, the US political establishment—both Democratic and Republican—has come to the conclusion that Afghanistan can be subdued only through a massive escalation of military violence against the Afghan people and their resistance to foreign occupation.

That the Russian ruling elite is willing to assist its American counterpart in this criminal enterprise, despite Washington's clear goal of achieving hegemony in the region, is an expression of the concern in Moscow that a defeat for US imperialism would threaten its own interests in the region.

Across Central Asia, billions of dollars of oil and natural gas are exported, while the working people of the region live in poverty, ruled over by autocratic regimes backed by Moscow or Washington. As shown by the Afghan insurgency and the March overthrow of Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan, these Central Asian pawns of the major powers are highly vulnerable to opposition from below.

Afghanistan has long been considered vital to Moscow's strategic interests. In the 19th century, tsarist Russia and the British Empire fought their "Great Game" for control of the country.

The Kremlin has maintained links with the Northern Alliance warlords, whom it backed after the Soviet occupation and who now make up the main domestic bloc supporting the Karzai government. Any form of victory for the Taliban would come at the expense of these longstanding allies. Moscow also fears that Taliban successes in Afghanistan could embolden Islamist militants within its own Muslim-majority Caucasus provinces, including Chechnya.

In January last year, the government of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin opened up Russian airspace and overland train routes to allow United States and NATO forces to bring "non-lethal" military equipment into Afghanistan.

Since then, regular convoys of military-related rail freight have gone through Russia to Afghanistan. Termed the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) by US military planners, these rail supply lines have developed into a vital source of material for the occupation.

According to *Al Jazeera*, the US and NATO will transport between 16,000 and 26,000 containers of equipment into Afghanistan via the NDN this year. This represents a three-fold increase in freight coming across the NDN since 2009, accounting for up to a fifth of the total estimated 120,000 containers worth of equipment to be consumed by the occupation this year.

Trains are loaded with military supplies in Riga, the capital of Latvia, the former Soviet republic that since 2004 has been a member of NATO. The trains then cross Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan before entering Afghanistan and terminating at the city of Mazar-i-Sharif. A spur route bypasses Uzbekistan, entering Afghanistan via Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Ironically, the NDN utilizes the same rail lines developed by the Soviet government to supply its occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, which the US government opposed through its backing of mujahedeen fighters who went on to form the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

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In addition, according to the *New York Times*, commercial aircraft have been transporting military-related cargo from the Middle East to Afghanistan since late 2008.

According to estimates by the US Center for Strategic and International Studies, President Obama's "surge" of 60,000 extra US troops into Afghanistan will require three to four times more nonmilitary supplies alone in 2010-2011, compared to those required for the occupation in 2008. However, the raging insurgency in the south of the country has severely limited the main US-NATO supply routes coming from Pakistan. Hundreds of trucks carrying US and NATO equipment through the Khyber Pass, the main route between the two countries, have been struck by anti-occupation militants on both sides of the border.

The Pentagon was concerned that its besieged supply lines from Pakistan might have been unable to cope with the greater volume required by the surge. In addition, Washington is increasingly doubtful about the reliability of its allies in Islamabad. As shown by the military documents recently posted on WikiLeaks, US planners are concerned about senior Pakistani officials backing elements within the Afghan insurgency, giving Washington ample motive to develop alternative supply routes.

While air freight carries the bulk of materiel into Afghanistan, the importance of northern overland routes may become even greater following the overthrow of Bakiyev, which cast doubts on the reliability of the US air base at Manas in Kyrgyzstan. Here Russia also played a cooperative role with the US, as both powers exerted their influence immediately after the ouster of Bakiyev to back the assumption of power by Rosa Otunbayeva, a former ambassador to Washington, and other elite figures supportive of the presence of US and Russian air bases in Kyrgyzstan.

This reliance on Russian assistance in the occupation of Afghanistan has been one of the main factors behind the Obama administration's so-called "reset" of relations with the Kremlin. In a clear quid pro quo with Moscow, the White House has distanced itself from some of the Bush administration's most provocative actions towards Russia.

Last year, the Pentagon cancelled its planned missile shield bases in Poland and the Czech Republic, seen by Moscow as a threat to its ballistic capabilities, and Washington has effectively rejected, for the time being, NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, former republics of the USSR that share borders with Russia. However, US military planners are going ahead with an alternative missile shield plan using bases in NATO member states Bulgaria and Romania.

Moscow also hopes that improved relations with the US will further Russian interests vis-à-vis the other major powers. With the Europeans and China investing heavily in the Central Asian and Caucasus regions, Moscow is looking to secure its interests in the "near abroad" of the ex-Soviet states, even if this means a temporary alliance with Washington.

This is, to say the least, an unstable alliance. The longstanding US goal of dominating in the Middle East and the former-Soviet region has and will continue to bring Washington and Moscow into conflict.

Washington is developing a parallel supply route to bypass Russia. In addition to the NDN rail line beginning in Riga, the US has established a supply chain originating in the Georgian Black Sea port of Poti before passing through Azerbaijan, across the Caspian Sea, and feeding into the Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan rail line.

Washington's ultimate goal is to translate these military supply routes to Afghanistan into a permanent US military-transportation network in the region, capable of challenging the influence of Moscow and the growing power of Beijing in Central Asia.

In testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in December 2009, Stephen Blank of the US Army War College called for the NDN to become the "centerpiece of a coordinated policy" across the region. Complaining that there was an inadequate push for "enhanced US trade and investment programs to counter Russian and Chinese quests for lasting influence," Black called for the "Af-Pak strategy" to be transformed into "an overall regional strategy that embraces the entire region and sees all of its dimensions in their true strategic importance."

He continued: "Especially as we are now increasing our troop commitment to Afghanistan and building this new supply road [NDN], challenge and opportunity are coming together to suggest a more enduring basis for a lasting US contribution to Central Asia's long-term security. In effect, the present crisis [in Afghanistan] has brought matters to the point where the United States has obtained a second chance in Central Asia even as it is becoming more important in world affairs," Blank told the senators.

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