

Afghan president continues building ties with Moscow

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Afghanistan's puppet ruler, Hamid Karzai, visited the Russian capital on Friday—the second visit of the Afghan president to Moscow within six months.

For Karzai, the visit to Moscow was another opportunity to offer his Russian hosts a stake in Afghanistan, in exchange for aid and political support for his beleaguered Kabul regime. For the Kremlin, the visit marked a deepening of its efforts to secure the interests of the Russian elite in a region that Moscow has considered vital to its interests since the nineteenth century.

“We want to give a new start to vital projects that were begun very long ago,” Karzai told a joint news conference with Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev, referring to plans to rebuild “economic priority projects” in Afghanistan.

Kabul and Moscow have been in discussions over the past year regarding the reconstruction of infrastructure put in place by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Most of these facilities, such as roads, rail and government buildings, have been destroyed or badly damaged by three decades of near-continuous war and looting.

The Soviet-era projects expected to be rebuilt or repaired include the Salang Tunnel in the Hindu Kush mountains, completed by the USSR in 1963, a vital road linking Kabul with the north of Afghanistan. Other projects include hydroelectric power plants in Kabul and Baglan provinces, customs facilities at Kabul's main airport and the state university.

Medvedev told the same news conference, “Russian companies are already helping Afghanistan modernize the hydropower dam in Nughlu, and design and build small hydroelectricity stations in many other mountainous Afghan areas.”

“Russia is back with a program to support economic development in Afghanistan,” the Russian leader

stated.

There has been no firm declaration of who will pay for these projects, but the Kremlin has expressed its expectation that the European powers and the US should meet much of the cost.

In a separate statement, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced that Russia was prepared to invest a half-billion dollars in a new power line from Tajikistan, across Afghanistan to Pakistan.

Putin also declared that discussions would commence on Russian participation in a proposed major natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to India through Afghanistan.

The leaders discussed increased cooperation in efforts against the opium trade, with Afghanistan's poppy fields supplying almost all the heroin in Russia. Last year, Moscow joined with US and Afghan forces in four raids on drug factories in Afghanistan—the first major joint security operation between American and Russian forces in Afghan territory.

After Karzai's visit to Moscow, Viktor Ivanov, Russia's chief counternarcotics officer, told the Voice of Russia web site that further anti-drug cooperation with Kabul and Washington was planned.

“There will be broad intelligence sharing aimed at undermining cross-border activity by drug gangs. Russia is also offering the Afghans a sweeping program to destroy opium crops using mechanized sprayers.”

Russia has ruled out sending troops to the country, largely due to the bitter experiences of the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, when 15,000 military personnel died. However, enhanced security projects such as the joint narcotics raids mark a new stage in Moscow's collaboration in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

The Kremlin has also offered military and police

training to Kabul, as well as equipment to Afghanistan's security forces, including a donation of 20,000 AK-47 rifles and the sale of 21 MI-17 helicopters—to be paid for by the United States.

Moscow also plays an increased role in supplying the occupation through the opening up of its railways and airspace to NATO convoys going to Afghanistan. The Northern Distribution Network, a rail route going through Russia and Central Asia to Afghanistan, provides thousands of containers of supplies for the US-led war every month, offering Washington an important alternative supply line to the overland route from Pakistan through the Khyber Pass, which is regularly disrupted by anti-occupation militants.

Moscow sees an opportunity to advance its interests in Afghanistan and the Central Asia region, as a result of the military debacle of the US-NATO occupation and the general decline of US imperialism. Afghanistan's location between central and southern Asia makes it of enormous importance to the great powers, the reason the region has been fought over for over a century.

The planned energy pipelines from the Caspian Basin—the world's second largest reserve of oil and natural gas—through Afghanistan to the huge emerging market of India, and through Pakistan to the Arabian Sea and the world market, make the country an important potential transit route. Moscow's longstanding domination of the energy pipelines in the Central Asian region, and the Russian elite's economic dependence on the export of oil and natural gas, make Afghanistan crucial to its interests.

For now, Washington is willing to tolerate a limited increase in Russian influence in Afghanistan, as the US military struggles to crush the anti-occupation Afghan insurgency.

However, US imperialism will ultimately not tolerate any other power limiting its planned domination of the country and the region.

As well as a potential energy transit hub, Afghanistan offers US imperialism a base in the heart of Asia from which military operations can be carried out against the interests of its rivals, especially Russia and China.

Karzai hopes to take advantage of these great power rivalries in an attempt to overcome the acute isolation of his regime. With no popular base of support, and authority that fails to extend much beyond Kabul,

Karzai is desperate for any backing for his shaky rule.

Not only is the government in Kabul widely despised by most ordinary Afghans for its collaboration with the US-led occupation, its election-rigging, and its corruption, Karzai and the clique around him are also aware that Washington increasingly sees the regime as an impediment to the occupation, which is failing to subdue the insurgency.

Despite Karzai's presidency being entirely a creature of US imperialism—installed and kept in power by American bayonets—the Afghan president has raised the ire of Washington by making token criticisms of the most egregious examples of US and NATO war crimes, including night-time special forces raids and aerial bombardments that have slaughtered thousands of civilians. In addition, US strategists see the rampant corruption in all levels of the Afghan government acting as a recruiting aid for anti-occupation militant groups.

Karzai has reached out to other regional powers to secure his rule in the face of increased criticism from Washington. As well as courting Moscow, Karzai is developing close ties with Iran, India and China, while attempting to maintain the alliance between Kabul and Islamabad.

Like its "reset" of relations with Moscow, Washington's support for Karzai is a tactical exigency. Should Karzai's courting of Moscow and other regional powers threaten its plans, the US occupiers will have no compunction about removing the Afghan president.

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