

# NATO's Afghan draw-down stokes Kremlin's fears of clash with US

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As NATO forces prepare a draw-down of their troop levels in Afghanistan, the Kremlin is increasingly concerned that this heralds a sharp turn by Washington and its Islamist allies towards confrontation with Moscow in Central Asia.

Currently, the US has 68,000 US troops in Afghanistan, which it will begin to withdraw in 2014. While the US intends to maintain its military presence well past the 2014 deadline—it is building at least nine permanent military bases in Afghanistan—the troop draw-down is part of a broad shift in US foreign policy. Washington is rapidly moving to war in the Middle East, in an alliance with Al Qaeda-linked terrorist forces against Russia's ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, as preparation for conflict with Russia and China.

Washington's deepening alignment with Islamist terrorist groups, underscoring the geostrategic interests that drive its fraudulent “war on terror,” is also reflected in its Afghan policy. Together with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, it is holding stepped-up talks with the Taliban to prepare for the troop draw-down in Afghanistan (see: “Washington seeks Taliban deal as Afghanistan casualties mount”).

The Russian Vice-Defence Minister Anatoli Antonov recently stated that the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan was “too hasty.” He announced that Moscow was “striving to strengthen our contingents” in the neighbouring ex-Soviet republics of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan ahead of the pull-out.

The head of Russia's GRU military intelligence agency, Igor Sergun, described the situation in Afghanistan as “a serious challenge to international stability”.

The Kremlin and the ruling oligarchies in the Central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and

Tajikistan have supported NATO's bloody occupation of Afghanistan.

Russia also maintains close ties to the warlords of the Northern Alliance, which forms the backbone of the US-backed Karzai regime. The Kremlin granted crucial logistical support to the NATO occupation forces and has provided financial support and weapons to Karzai's regime since 2010.

Alongside several Eastern European and Caucasian countries, Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are part of the Northern Distribution Network, which resupplies NATO forces in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has made its air space available to NATO.

Russian aid to the NATO occupation of Afghanistan was one of the main elements of Washington's so-called “reset” with the Kremlin, aiming to stabilize US-Russian relations after the 2008 Georgian war. Washington's drawdown in Afghanistan and the US war in Syria have undermined the Kremlin's reactionary deal with US imperialism in Central Asia, however, based on supporting NATO's neo-colonial enslavement of the Afghan people.

US imperialism's aggressive policy in Central Asia threatens what the Kremlin sees as its fundamental strategic interests. Vladimir Zharikhin, the vice-director of the Russian Institute for the CIS, told the pro-Kremlin newspaper *Vzglyad*: “Our outer boundaries are essentially the borders of the Central Asian states. In other words, we will defend these countries—we don't really have a choice.”

Russia maintains its biggest military base in Central Asia: the 201st Army Division's base in Tajikistan. Overall, some 7,000 Russian soldiers are stationed there. A further 700 soldiers are stationed in Kyrgyzstan, where Russia also maintains the Kant air base near the capital, Bishkek. Both bases are regarded

by the Kremlin as important bastions for defending its interests in Central Asia.

US policy threatens to undermine not only Russian interests in neighbouring Central Asian republics, however, but also Russia's territorial unity itself. Russia itself has a large Muslim population of over 16 million, concentrated in the southern regions of Russia bordering Central Asia and the Caucasus. This population is deeply oppressed, due both to the broader disintegration of living standards in Russia since the collapse of the USSR, and to the Kremlin's chauvinist, anti-Muslim policies.

Since the dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism in 1991, the Kremlin has waged two major wars in the Muslim-dominated North Caucasus region of Russia, killing tens of thousands of people.

Broad disaffection with the Kremlin among Russian Muslims has allowed Islamist groups tied to Al Qaeda, Saudi Arabia, and the United States to operate in the North Caucasus. These groups have backed the US war against Syria, with Islamist fighters from the North Caucasian region of Chechnya joining US-backed opposition groups fighting the Syrian regime.

Under these conditions, the Kremlin is moving quickly to strengthen its military positions in Central Asia. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Tajik counterpart agreed in early August to extend the operation of the 201st Division's military base, which was opened in 2004, to 2042. The Kremlin will also provide \$200 million in financial aid to the Tajik army.

Kyrgyzstan will receive \$1 billion to rearm its military.

Russian commentators are concerned that Russia's existing network of bases is insufficient to safeguard its borders in case of a major war.

The Tajik-Afghan border, in particular, is of concern to the Kremlin. Tajikistan, a country of 8 million people that used to be part of the Soviet Union, shares a 1,200-kilometer border with Afghanistan to the south. Tajiks—who are ethnically Persian and constitute the dominant ethnic group in Tajikistan—also make up roughly one quarter (27 percent) of the Afghan population.

From 1992 to 1997 a bloody civil war in Tajikistan cost up to 100,000 lives, leaving the country in shambles. Hundreds of thousands of people fled to Afghanistan. Despite the Moscow-backed truce of 1997

between the Tajik government and the Democratic-Islamist opposition, political and ethnic tensions in the country have remained high.

The governments in both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have been fighting the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has been supported by the Taliban and fought alongside it against the US occupation in Afghanistan. After heavy losses in the Afghan war, its activities remain limited to the south of Tajikistan, although there are also reports of IMU presence in other Central Asian states.

The Tajik government recently warned of growing influence of the IMU in the southern Tajik region of Gorno-Badakshchan. Modest Kolerov, a well-known pro-Kremlin journalist and historian, warned in *Vzglyad* that there were currently no prospects of a stable border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.



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