

War in Afghanistan spills over into Tajikistan, heightening Kremlin's fears

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13 July 2021

As the US is completing its troop withdrawal from Afghanistan after two decades of a bloody and criminal war, numerous reports indicate that the ongoing conflict has already begun spilling over into neighboring Tajikistan. Last Monday, 1,500 Afghan soldiers fled across the border into Tajikistan, an impoverished former Soviet republic, to escape the advance of the Taliban. Tajikistan has a border with Afghanistan stretching 1,357 kilometers, or 804 miles.

According to the BBC, the soldiers, who were later flown back to Kabul, were desperate for food and water. Another 1,000 civilians reportedly also fled into Tajikistan. Political commentators are warning that many thousands more refugees may seek refuge in Tajikistan and other neighboring countries in the coming weeks and months as whatever has remained of social infrastructure in Afghanistan is experiencing a catastrophic collapse. One commentator in *Foreign Policy* warned that millions of people in Afghanistan could face famine within the next 12 months and that the country could become “the world’s next Yemen.”

Tajikistan itself has been devastated by the impact of capitalist restoration and is the most impoverished of all former Soviet republics. Almost half of the population lacks access to clean running water and a third of the country’s GDP comes from remittances sent by Tajiks working under horrendous conditions as migrants in Russia. The country is highly unstable politically and was just recently embroiled in a bloody border conflict with Kyrgyzstan that killed over 50 people.

Since last week, the Taliban have made further advances in Afghanistan, and are now claiming to control 85 percent of the country’s territory. The Tajik government has ordered the mobilization of 20,000 military reservists and requested help from Russia to guard the country’s borders. However, a report by Eurasianet indicates that the border is already de facto

under the control of the Taliban.

The outlet quoted Anatoly Sidorov, the head of the Joint Staff at the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, as saying on July 8, “They [the Taliban] have set up observation posts, checkpoints, and security posts [along the entire border]. It is all marked with white flags, there is everything there in open view, including weapons. They are not hiding anything.” Both the Afghan government and the Tajik government have refused to respond to requests for comments on the situation by Eurasianet.

The spill-over of the military conflict in Afghanistan into Tajikistan, which is home to a Russian military base with 7,000 soldiers, has provoked enormous concerns in the Kremlin. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated last Wednesday, “We are closely watching what is happening in Afghanistan where the situation has a tendency to swiftly deteriorate including against the backdrop of the hasty exit of American and other NATO troops.” He also made clear that, if necessary, Russia would use its troops stationed in Tajikistan to secure the country’s border. However, Russian press commentators assume that the Kremlin would only act in case of an open military assault from Afghanistan.

The spill-over of the conflict to neighboring countries and the emerging humanitarian catastrophe underscore that the US troop withdrawal, coming after three decades of unending wars in the Middle East is far from bringing an end to the crimes of imperialism in the region. Rather, it is serving as a catalyst for an escalation of geopolitical, ethnic and religious conflicts that have been fueled for decades.

From its beginning, the war in Afghanistan was part of the efforts of US imperialism to bring the entire core region of Europe and Asia (called “Eurasia” by geostrategists), especially the Middle East and Central Asia, under its full control in the aftermath of the Stalinist

dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. While invading Iraq and Afghanistan in the Middle East and Central Asia, the US has systematically encircled Russia on its western borders, drawing many countries of the former Soviet bloc into NATO and staging coups in the Black Sea region in Georgia in 2003 and most recently Ukraine, in 2014.

In Central Asia, the US orchestrated a coup in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. Having emerged from the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy, and deeply dependent upon imperialism, the Russian oligarchy has been incapable of responding to these ongoing interventions and aggressions outside of a combination of appealing to the imperialist powers and the promotion of nationalism and militarism, which has only served to further fuel military and ethnic tensions, including within its own borders.

Now, the Kremlin fears that the shift in US foreign policy and the rapid rise of the Taliban will further destabilize the entire region and strengthen Islamist tendencies across Central Asia and in Russia itself.

From 1994 to 2009, the Kremlin has waged two bloody wars against separatist, Islamist tendencies in the North Caucasian republic of Chechnya, which sought to break away from the Russian Federation. These forces were encouraged by US imperialism, especially in the 1990s, with the aim of fostering the break-up of Russia along ethnic lines.

Since then, Islamist forces from the North Caucasus, especially the Caucasus Emirate, are known to have developed close ties with the Taliban, al Qaeda and ISIS, all of which have been able to recruit a significant number of fighters from Chechnya.

In 2014, an active-duty US special operations officer told ABC News that “a fair percentage of the overall enemy population” in the early period of the Afghan war were “Chechens.” Radical Islamists from Chechnya are also known to have joined various US-backed militias that have been fighting against the Assad government in the civil war in Syria.

Moreover, the Kremlin is well aware that the US troop withdrawal, far from signaling an end to US imperialist aggression, is part of a broader reorientation of US imperialism toward preparations for a great power conflict, targeting above all China, but also Russia. Especially over the past decade, China has developed extremely close economic ties with the countries in Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, often outstripping the previously dominant

influence of Russia.

Having already been drawn into the maelstrom of the imperialist encirclement of Russia, geopolitical tensions in the region will now be further fueled by the open US war preparations against China. Russia and China, too, have competing interests in Central Asia that are often only barely reconciled, based on the common goal of limiting US influence.

Against this background, the Kremlin has been particularly alarmed by news reports indicating that the US is looking into opening a new military base in a former Soviet republic to keep troops stationed in Central Asia. In May, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, citing anonymous sources in the US government and military leadership, that “U.S. military commanders want bases for troops, drones, bombers and artillery to shore up the Afghan government, keep the Taliban insurgency in check and monitor other extremists. Options being assessed range from nearby countries to more distant Arab Gulf emirates and Navy ships at sea.” According to the newspaper, the US is eyeing “Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which border Afghanistan and would allow for quick access.”

The Russian *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* commented at the time that these reports “seem to have seriously alarmed the Russian leadership” and that the “Kremlin clearly regarded the news reports on this as a preliminary political probe.” Following the American press reports, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu travelled to Dushanbe and Tashkent, and Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon was invited to Moscow for a state visit.

In the American ruling class, a new military base is still being debated. The military policy blog War on the Rocks recently published a piece strongly arguing against a new military base in Central Asia. The think tank journal *Foreign Policy* published a comment by Phil Caruso, a member of the US Council on Foreign Relations, warning that the US would not be able to defend its interests in the region after the withdrawal “without bases nearby.”



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