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Nikolay P. MEDVEDEV,

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Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor of Faculty of Humanities
and Social Sciences, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
(RUDN University) (Russia, Moscow)

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www.voprospolitolog.ru,
www.souzpolitolog.ru
E-mail: voprospolitolog@yandex.ru,
souzpolitolog@yandex.ru

Executive Secretary
Shkurina S.S.

Computer-aided makeup by
Antsiferova A.S.

Translated by
Chernyshova E.V.

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RUSSIA'S STRATEGY TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN

Over the past 15 years, Russia and the United States have pursued much the same goals in Afghanistan: they have sought to prevent chaos and prevent the country from turning into a safe haven for terrorists. This convergence of objectives enabled the two countries to cooperate. However, in reality, there are serious differences between them. In his article, the author analyzes the strategy of Russia in respect of Afghanistan.

Key words: *Russia's policy, the unipolar system of international relations, the war in Afghanistan, the settlement of the political conflict.*

The U.S. approach is based on the establishment of a strong central government in Kabul, as well as well-armed and trained security services. Meanwhile, Russia prefers to work with a number of forces, some of which openly opposing the government in Kabul. Moscow has even established contacts with the Taliban (a terrorist organization banned in Russia), thus giving legitimacy to the group, which continues to threaten the security of the Afghan government, NATO forces and the United States.

Over the past couple of years, the gap between the U.S. and Russian strategies has widened. Russia increasingly insists that the US approach does not work and that the Washington political will needed to continue the campaign in Afghanistan will soon run out. Moscow is convinced that it will have to deal with an unstable Afghanistan. This is a serious problem for Russia. However, it also provides an opportunity to undermine the U.S. positions: Russia can become an influential player.

When the U.S. entered Afghanistan in 2001 many interests of the US and Russian largely coincided. Both countries wanted to destroy al-Qaeda (a terrorist organization banned in Russia) and closely related terrorist groups and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists.

When Russian troops left Afghanistan in 1989, Moscow feared that there would be a political vacuum that would provoke the rise of extremism and the formation of terrorist threats. Moscow was suspicious of the prospect of a long-term US military presence in Afghanistan, but it tolerated American and NATO operations in the hope that they would help bring stability back to the region. Co-

operation between Russia and the United States in Afghanistan reached its peak during the Obama administration, when Moscow allowed the U.S. and NATO forces to transport weapons and equipment through the Russian territory, it sold Mi-17 helicopters to American-backed Afghan forces and collaborated with the United States to reduce production of drugs and drug trafficking [2].

After a while, Russia began to gradually lose faith in the fact that the United States are ready and able to complete its mission in Afghanistan. Moscow began to develop its own strategy to protect its interests and prevent a possible collapse of the government in Kabul. Moscow has made it clear to Washington that it does not want the U.S. to quickly withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. In January 2017, Zamir Kabulov, the Russian President's special representative for Afghanistan, said that if Donald Trump "decides to withdraw the military contingent, everything would collapse [1]"

Although Moscow supported the presence of American troops in Afghanistan, the new U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, which the Trump administration announced in August 2017, did not impress Moscow. From Moscow's point of view, the strategy, which implies a slight increase in the number of troops, the resumption of the fight against terrorism and the open date of the final withdrawal of troops, is almost no different from the previous strategy. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called the focus on the use of force a "dead end," and his representative said that the new strategy is almost no different from Obama's strategy, which "has not helped to improve the security situation in the country." Russian officials also criticized the Pentagon's decision to stop buying Mi-17 for the Afghan army and replace them with the American Black Hawk helicopters, calling it an exclusively political decision that resulted from the introduction of anti-Russian sanctions.

Over the past few years, Russia has conducted a number of foreign policy maneuvers in the Middle East designed to bring it political and economic benefits and turn it into a key player in the settlement of future conflicts. Among these maneuvers, we can highlight Russia's military campaign in Syria, as well as the establishment of relations with the Egyptian government, which has already given prior consent to the use by Russia of the Egyptian air bases. Moscow's policy in Afghanistan is a continuation of this strategy, and it is not limited to ensuring stability on the ground. Russia creates its own network of contacts and means to protect Russian interests in the event of the collapse of the central government [3]. It also seeks to strengthen its position as an influential player in the region and to consolidate its reputation as an integral participant in the resolution of any global crisis.

Russia's activities in Afghanistan include business investment proposals, a diplomatic campaign, cultural programs and financial and military support for the central government, powerful forces in the North and the Taliban. Since 2016, Russia has provided the Afghan government with tens of thousands of Kalash-

nikov rifles and millions of rounds of ammunition. In implementing this strategy, Russia has a number of advantages over the United States. Many Russian officers, security personnel and diplomats have experience in Afghanistan that they have gained during the Soviet-Afghan war. A significant proportion of Afghan officials and military officers have been educated or trained in Russia. And the Russian government, which does not bind itself to specific values or ideology, can freely make alliances with any group that seems the most influential to it.

This flexibility allowed Russia to work with the Taliban. The Kremlin believes that this group seeks to gain control over the territories inside Afghanistan and therefore is a threat only to the Afghan government, without posing any threat outside the country. In this sense, it is very different from ISIS (a terrorist group banned in Russia), elements of which operate in Afghanistan and Pakistan and which Moscow considers a transnational group posing a threat to Central Asia and Russia.

The amount of assistance provided by Russia to the Taliban remains unknown. However, the main thing here is that Moscow has managed to establish relations with the Taliban leadership that allowed it to increase its influence and become a party to the peace talks. In November, Mohammad Atmar, national security adviser to the Afghan government, announced that talks between Moscow and the Taliban have a “significant role” [6].

Moscow has already made several attempts to contribute to the diplomatic solution of the problems. From December 2016 to April 2017, Russia held three rounds of talks with the participation of China, Iran and Pakistan. Afghanistan also took part in the third round. In October 2018, Russia hosted a meeting of the contact group of the Shanghai cooperation organization on Afghanistan, which was attended by representatives of member countries, including India and Pakistan, as well as representatives of the Afghan government. Although these discussions did not bring any concrete results, Russia has achieved its main goal: it has managed to position itself as a key participant in the negotiations [4].

Moscow has also made great efforts to establish bilateral relations with other countries in the region. In 2016, Russia and Pakistan conducted their first joint military exercises and signed an agreement for Pakistan to purchase Russian Mi-35 combat helicopters. Moscow is cooperating with Iran, which is its ally in Syria, to strengthen its contacts inside Afghanistan and relations with the Taliban. Moscow's authority as a key player in Afghanistan will strengthen the confidence of its Central Asian allies in Russia's ability to ensure their security through the influence of China's trade and investment in the region.

Russia's strategy in Afghanistan includes a number of elements that are present in its successful Syrian strategy. In both countries, Russia took advantage of the weakening US position. Having held talks in Afghanistan, as it has done with the participants in the Syrian conflict, it has consolidated its role as a party to any future agreement. Moscow will be able to guarantee its influence in the long term

and force the US to reconsider its role in the country. In Syria, Russia has achieved this with the help of military force, and in Afghanistan, it uses relations with the key political players, as well as its influence in the sphere of business and culture.

Afghanistan is now in such a deplorable state that Russia and the United States have plenty of reasons to cooperate. It is necessary to destroy terrorist groups, it is necessary to prepare and arm the national army, to restore the economy and infrastructure and to provide humanitarian assistance. Both Russia and the US are seeking to eliminate the threat from ISIS, whose presence in the North and East of Afghanistan continues to grow. Russia wants to tackle the problem of drug production in the country: according to a 2017 study, approximately 25% of Afghan heroin flows through Central Asia to Russia and Europe, and drug trafficking is an important source of income for the terrorist groups in Afghanistan. However, the gap between the strategies of Russia and the United States continues to grow: today the need to solve only the most serious problems – terrorism and drugs – can serve as the basis for their cooperation. Countries are able to cooperate at the tactical level – for example, to exchange data on the whereabouts of terrorists or other similar information [5].

Russia's actions in Afghanistan often run counter to American interests. Moscow's increasingly active position has given Afghan groups the opportunity to push external players against each other. This will only increase internal rivalry at a time when the stability of the country depends on the strengthening of the central government. Russia's interaction with the Taliban has given strength to this group, which has done a great deal to prevent the central government from consolidating its power. Acting in this way, Moscow hopes to simultaneously achieve two main goals: to liberate Afghanistan from terrorists that could threaten Russia and its neighbors, and to take advantage of the US retreat to secure the status of an influential world power.

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