

Russia Views with Alarm the Taliban Return to Power in Afghanistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

March 11—It is a certainty that one of the key subjects of discussion March 11-12, between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, when Putin visits India, will be the changing situation in Afghanistan. There is little doubt that the mooted return of the Taliban to share power with a weakened President Hamid Karzai has set off alarm bells, in the capitals of both these nations.

To counter the jihadi terrorism menace, India and Russia will have to recognize two realities. First, the Islamic jihadis are trained and instigated by the British, and financed by the Saudis and Afghan opium. Unless London and Riyadh are told, in no uncertain terms, that both Russia and India are ready to expose the mentors and backers of the jihadis, terrorism will not come to an end.

The second reality that these two countries must grasp, is that joint efforts, using their security apparatus, scientific and technological abilities, and economic might will be necessary to counter the foreign-bred and -trained terrorists. The stronger Russia and India become through bilateral cooperation, the weaker the jihadis will be.

Meanwhile, the Indian media reports that discussions have begun at a high level in New Delhi about whether to open talks with Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, and the Afghan Taliban, in light of the increasing evidence that the U.S.-NATO troops are losing ground rapidly, and that the only option the Obama Administration is now looking at, is bringing in the Taliban to share power in Kabul. India's National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon has already visited Kabul, ostensibly to investigate the latest attack on Indian citizens there; and it can be fairly assumed that his view of the unraveling Afghan situation is no different.

It is likely that the re-think on New Delhi's part is based on a number of factors. There is a realization

that with the deterioration of the Afghan security situation, and the further weakening of Karzai by the U.S. and NATO, the control of Afghanistan is steadily slipping into the hands of the Pakistani Army and ISI, and the battling Taliban. Having invested about \$1.7 billion in various infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, India is now fearful that if political bridges are not built with the ISI and the Afghan Taliban quickly, India may become irrelevant in Afghanistan. At the same time, India is also considering paring down its involvement in reconstruction projects in Afghanistan. Projects under way may be wrapped up quickly and there may even be a freeze on undertaking new projects. Islamabad has made clear that it views a strong Indian presence in Afghanistan as a security threat to Pakistan.

Media reports indicate that the advice to engage with sections of the Taliban and to start a limited dialogue with the ISI came from the Prime Minister's office. Although controversial, the advice stems from India's need to ensure that Afghanistan is not handed over on a platter to Pakistan. In line with that thinking, India is also considering helping prop up a friendly political alliance in Afghanistan, and intensively engaging with Russia and Iran.

As yet, no such re-think has been reported to be taking place in Russia. While India's concern over the Taliban coming back to power centers on how to protect the good work that New Delhi has done during the U.S. and NATO occupation of Afghanistan, as well as India's strategic interest in that country, Russia's worries are different. Moscow, and the nations that Moscow considers should be in its sphere of influence in Central Asia, are already under attack from the forces that are operating inside Afghanistan. Moscow fears that the U.S. and NATO decision to endorse an Afghan Taliban takeover of Kabul would further embolden the anti-Russia forces in and around Afghanistan. It is expected



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The meeting March 12 in New Delhi, of Russian Premier Vladimir Putin and his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh, took place as alarm bells went off in both nations, over the return of the Taliban to share power in Afghanistan.

that Russia will plan some contingency measures to strengthen its security in light of that threat.

Use of Opium To Weaken Russia's Southern Flank

It is now well established that the Central Asian states, north of Afghanistan, have been devastated by drug-money-financed terrorist movements, dressed in the garb of orthodox Wahhabi Islam. Located south and west of Afghanistan, Iran has been inundated by opium and heroin, which are destroying a generation of Iranians. This region has been systematically handed over to the terrorists, since the United States and its NATO allies launched their War on Terror, ostensibly

to eliminate violence and terrorism in Afghanistan.

In 2001, when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan to oust the Taliban, which harbored the infamous al-Qaeda, Afghanistan produced less than 100 tons of opium per year. In 2007, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Afghanistan's opium production was 8,240 tons—twice as much as was ever produced during the Taliban's five-year reign, and at least eight times the quantity Afghanistan produced before the Soviet Army invaded in 1979. In 2008, production dropped, through a successful eradication campaign, to 7,700 tons. In 2009, according to the U.S. State Department's International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), released this month, citing UNODC, opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan decreased from 160,000 hectares to 120,000 hectares. However, because of improved weather and enhanced productivity, yields increased. The UNODC estimates that production of opium gum will be 6,900 tons in 2009.

The reduction in cultivation has been attributed to a combination of factors, including decreased opium prices relative to abnormally high wheat prices, and improved governance and security in key provinces. This amount of opium, converted into heroin, would still generate about \$4 billion for those Afghans who control the business, while the street value in Europe of that heroin could be anywhere between \$130 and \$140 billion.

Moreover, the data presented by the UNODC shows that the opium poppy fields were larger in 2009 than in 2006, when British troops were deployed into Helmand Province. Although the country's opium poppy areas decreased by 22%, the production of raw opium fell by only 10%, at most. British experts have established that Afghan farmers have learned to produce more opium juice per poppy than a year ago: 56 kilograms of opium per hectare (2.47 acres), and 15% more.

According to British sources, the overwhelming majority of captured Taliban admit that they receive the bulk of their funds for food, fuel, and weapons from the drug business. The price of raw opium has fallen to \$48 per kilo, as the supply has dramatically increased—yet further proof of the failure of U.S. and British anti-drug policies.

In September 2005, in testimony prepared for the U.S. House Committee on Armed Services Threat Panel hearing on threats in Eurasia, U.S. Central Asia security expert Martha Brill Olcott said: “One of the as yet unwritten stories associated with the ouster of [Kyrgyz] President Askar Akayev last March was the role drug money played in mobilizing support both for and against the now-deposed president. As with so many interesting stories in Central Asia, what everyone knows and what everyone says are usually two different things.”

Olcott also said: “The role that drug money plays in making and breaking governments in this region is certain to increase, as long as the drug trade from Afghanistan continues almost uncurbed. And, drug money is already so important for most of the countries of the region, that should narcotics production be sharply curtailed in Afghanistan, it might reappear in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, or Kyrgyzstan—all weak states, with the right climate-soil conditions for cultivation [as is the case for parts of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan]. . . .”

The Jihadi Terrorist Threat

In recent years, the North Caucasus region of Russia has been ravaged by Wahhabi-indoctrinated jihadis, who are now stronger than ever in Chechnya and in two flanking provinces, Dagestan and Ingushetia. In an interview with *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, Boris Karnaukhov, deputy head of the Russian government’s criminal investigation arm for the North Caucasus, points to the very different trends observed over the past year in Chechnya and Dagestan. In the former, the number of crimes against government officials has fallen, but, in the latter, there has been a sharp increase.

Jihadis in the Russian provinces and in the five “stan” countries (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan) are intertwined, but their mode of operation is different. In the Russian provinces such as Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia, the jihadis combine their separatist flag with their demands for a supranational Islamic Caliphate. In the “stan” countries, the objective of the jihadis is to remove the moderate Muslims and take control. The jihadis have also become prominent in Azerbaijan and Abkhazia, among other areas.

The intertwining among the jihadis operating in



Captured Taliban reportedly admit that the majority of their funding for food, fuel, and weapons is provided by the Afghan opium traffic, which has exploded under the watchful eyes of the British forces in Helmand province. Shown: Taliban in Herat, Afghanistan.

Russia and Central Asia has been made possible by the opium/heroin money used to finance insurgency operations, and by the jihadis’ demand for a Caliphate to secure support in the Muslim world. The demand for a Caliphate is also a convenient tool to give terrorism a religious “color,” telling Muslims that they are fighting a religious war against the infidels.

At the core of the jihadi operation sits the London-headquartered Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT), a Wahhabi Sunni-dominated pan-Islamic movement. This supranational outfit wants to unseat governments of all sovereign Islamic nation-states, and establish a Caliphate in their

place, that will govern by the laws established by the Ummah (community of the Muslim world). Although HuT is recognized as a terrorist organization, and hence, is banned in many countries, it is fully functional in, and protected by, Britain. Besides the opium/heroin money, the HuT is financed by the Saudis and Kuwaitis.

The HuT officially opposes violence. According to published reports by experts, it is predominantly active in Central Asia and parts of Europe—notably Britain. It claims to be active in over 40 countries with 5,000 to 10,000 core members. The group has been known to have strongholds in the mixed border region of the Fergana Valley of Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan, where most of their activity is carried out.

While official HuT members preach the peaceful establishment of the Caliphate, the group interacts closely with many terrorist jihadi groups, such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), among others. The IMU provides the main impetus, keeping the insurgency going in Russia and Central Asia. However, there is also evidence of some LeT activity in this area. The interplay between the HuT and the IMU is interesting: While the HuT members carry the Holy Quran, the IMU carry assault rifles. Central Asian intelligence officials point out that most, if not all, members of the IMU are former peace-loving, Caliphate-seeking HuT.

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) has long accused Hizb ut-Tahrir of links with separatist fighters and alleged Arab mercenaries combatting Russian troops in the breakaway republic of Chechnya. The FSB claims the group has been officially joined by members of the IMU. Observers note that the IMU is, in turn, linked to the Afghan Taliban. Routed and pushed out of Afghanistan during the early U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan, they have found a home in the tribal areas of Pakistan. At least until recently, the IMU were protected by Pakistani intelligence. Under American pressure, the Pakistani military has pushed them northward into the "stan" countries.

Moscow has reason to worry that when the Afghan Taliban re-acquires power in Kabul, these terrorist groups will have their shelter in Afghanistan. There, they will recruit, arm, and train the terrorists, probably with the help of professional soldiers from the Pakistani military. A safehouse as large as the nation of Afghanistan will provide the IMU, HuT, and other terrorist groups an ever-expanding base from which to launch deadly at-

tacks into Central Asia and the North Caucasus.

Russia, a victim of the Afghan opium/heroin influx that has created almost 2.5 million addicts, has raised the security threat that the Afghan opium traffic poses in the region, in international fora over the years. Following the attack on Mumbai in November 2008, Viktor Ivanov, the director of Russia's federal anti-narcotics service, in an interview with the Russian daily *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, said: "The gathered inputs testify that regional drug baron Dawood Ibrahim had provided his logistics network for preparing and carrying out the Mumbai terror attacks." The daily continued, "Ivanov said the Mumbai attacks were a burning example of how the illegal drug-trafficking network was used for carrying out terrorism."

In February, Ivanov told the press: "Whereas drug production in Afghanistan has increased 40 times during the last 10 years in the presence of international troops, the previous year saw only a dramatic decline in the volume of confiscated Drugs. The number of arrests of drug dealers has likewise dwindled 13 times, and the number of drug laboratories increased 10 times in the last three years." Ivanov added that this may have serious ramifications for the West's peace efforts in Afghanistan. He also expressed deep concern over the alarming rise in the flow of drugs from Afghanistan into Daghestan in Russia's volatile North Caucasus region, leading to an increase in crime and terrorist activity.

He noted that the United Nations had shirked its responsibilities in implementing an anti-drug program in Afghanistan, leaving it to NATO, which, in turn, had passed the issue on to local authorities. "The main emphasis should therefore be laid on improving mechanisms of international cooperation, because without cooperation it will be virtually impossible to effectively tackle ... the drug situation within the country," Ivanov said.

On March 3, Ivanov told RIA Novosti that the international forces in Afghanistan have failed to tackle drug trafficking during their nine-year military presence. Afghan opium production increased dramatically after the U.S.-led invasion that toppled the Taliban in 2001; and Russia has been one of the most affected countries, with heroin consumption rising steeply, he pointed out. Dmitri Rogozin, Russia's envoy to NATO, described "heroin aggression" as "the main threat to Russia." Last month, Moscow urged NATO to prioritize the fight against drug trafficking in Afghanistan.