

## Central Asia's Northern Exposure

By Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas Sanderson

August 4, 2009

TASHKENT, UZBEKISTAN — Russian agreement to allow U.S. military over-flight rights to ferry lethal goods to Afghanistan was one of the signal achievements of the recent meetings in Moscow between Presidents Barack Obama and Dimtri Medvedev.

Last month in Moscow, Russian officials told us that Afghanistan was the area where American and Russian interests are most closely aligned, and cooperation on stabilizing Afghanistan may be the most promising area to “reset” our bilateral relationship.

Less publicized has been Moscow's agreement earlier this year to allow for overland transit of nonlethal goods through Russian territory and on to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (with Kazakh and Uzbek agreement, of course) where they cross into northern Afghanistan at Heraton. These goods are shipped on trains that originate in the Latvian capital of Riga, and since the transit corridor was established, at least 20 rail convoys have made the trip. The supply trains have been given preferential right-of-way to speed the trip to about nine days.

Perhaps even less well-known is that Russian commercial cargo carriers have been shipping non-lethal goods out of the Middle East aboard massive Antonov 124 “Ruslan” cargo planes to Afghanistan for more than a year. To the great relief of the Pentagon, whose own cargo fleet is under tremendous stress, this heavy lift service was one of the few areas of U.S.-Russian cooperation that did not fall victim to the breakdown in the relationship last year over the Georgia war.

It seems a little odd that aspects of this cooperation on Afghanistan — one of Washington's highest foreign and security policy challenges — are not better known. Perhaps that is because there remain questions about just how much Russia wants to see the United States succeed in Afghanistan. This issue was certainly raised earlier this year when the government of Kyrgyzstan announced that it would close the U.S. base in Manas, a decision that was reversed shortly before the Obama-Medvedev meeting last month, presumably with Russian support.

In our recent discussions in Tashkent with very high-level Uzbek government officials, this question came up repeatedly, and the answers we got were not reassuring. Uzbekistan is the key country in the establishment of the northern supply route, what the U.S. military calls the Northern Distribution Network. The United States needs the NDN both because of its over-reliance on a single line of transit through volatile regions of Pakistan and because its growing military force in Afghanistan will require a threefold increase in supplies.

Uzbek officials are deeply skeptical of Moscow. They believe the Russians see their interests best served by continued instability in Afghanistan. Instability will increase both the terrorist threat to Central Asia as well as the flow of drugs, and serve to justify a heightened Russian military presence in the region.

Afghan instability also prevents opening or expanding southern transit corridors for Central Asian exports that could quickly reach global markets from ports in either Pakistan or Iran. Instead, the bulk of goods from Uzbekistan and its neighbors must be shipped northward, leaving them dependent on routes controlled by Moscow.

The Russians already have a major military presence in Tajikistan, as well as an air base in Kyrgyzstan at Kant, near the Manas airport outside the capital of Bishkek. Moscow hopes to finalize an agreement soon to establish a new base in Kyrgyzstan near the southern city of Osh in the volatile Fergana Valley that would house a newly established Rapid Reaction Force — mostly manned by Russian troops — of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Tashkent views the growing Russian military presence in the region as a security threat. The manner in which Russian “peace-keeping” forces were mobilized in the Georgia war last summer made a deep impact on Uzbek policymakers, heightening their sense of vulnerability. Uzbek skepticism about Russian goals is so deep that several key figures intimated that when it comes to Afghanistan, Iran would be a more reliable partner for Washington than Moscow.

The Uzbeks we spoke with were unanimous in the view that eventual success in stabilizing Afghanistan requires as much attention to social-economic development as it does to military goals. Any security gains will certainly be short-lived if Afghanistan remains impoverished and economically isolated. Building a transportation infrastructure linking Afghanistan to regional and global markets will be essential for this success and should be a key element of President Obama’s regional strategy for Afghanistan.

For strategic and economic reasons, Uzbekistan wants to be a key partner for the United States and its allies in these efforts. Unfortunately, high levels of corruption and a highly complicated investment environment do not make it easy for American companies or U.S. institutions like the Export-Import Bank and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation to operate. Resolving these differences to enable greater U.S. economic engagement will be a critical and difficult step in strengthening U.S.-Uzbek relations.

Washington’s potential for success in Afghanistan will also depend to some extent on how well the new NDN supply line operates. There are still political and logistical kinks in the route. U.S. policymakers have to contend with eliciting cooperation from Moscow without compromising the sovereignty and independence of other Central Asian partners. Uzbekistan is key to the success of the supply route as well as broader Afghan stabilization, but the Uzbeks remain very concerned about Moscow’s announced doctrine of “privileged relations with its neighbors.”

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