

Spectre of Syria Haunts Afghanistan

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The Moscow daily Vedomosti with links to the establishment has reported that Russia will give “limited military support” to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the event of attacks from Afghanistan, including weapons supplies, air support and deployment of special forces, but there are “no plans to deploy major ground forces” to the region.

The daily quoted sources close to the Russian defence ministry to the effect that special operations units may “play a key role if tensions do rise”. The daily report concluded with an expert opinion that if the security scenario worsens critically, a Russian operation “similar to the Syrian one may take place, which will involve airstrikes and missions of special operations forces. And like in Syria, this kind of operation will include the limited use of unguided munitions that may prove effective given the nature of possible hostilities.”

Indeed, the Russian military preparedness has shifted gear lately. Around 2500 troops from Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan kicked off large-scale joint drills at the Kharb-Maidon practice range in Tajikistan, located 20 km from the Afghan border, on August 5 that will run through August 10. The drills involve 2500 troops, including 1800 Russian personnel drawn mostly from units of Russia’s 201st military base in Tajikistan.

The deputy commander of Russia’s Central Military District Lieutenant-General Yevgeny Poplavsky told the media that “military threats are mounting and the situation is becoming increasingly tense and unpredictable. The joint drills will enable us to check the accumulated combat experience, test optimal forms of troop employment and work out common approaches to warfare.”

Meanwhile, a parallel Russian-Uzbek “tactical exercise” has also been held last week against the backdrop of the Afghan situation, which ended near the Uzbek border city of Termez on the Amu Darya on Friday.

This exercise simulated special operations by a joint Russian-Uzbek contingent countering illegal armed groups from Afghanistan crossing the Amu Darya border.

Interestingly, the commander of Russia’s Central Military Region, Mikhail Teplinsky, told the media,

“The scenario of the exercise was based on the Russian military’s experience obtained in operations against illegal armed groups in Syria.”

Participating in the exercise were about 1500 men from the two countries, equipped with special vehicles and planes, who conducted air reconnaissance and prevented large armed groups from crossing over. Significantly, the Chief of Russia’s General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov visited Termez to observe the exercise.

Uzbekistan has a 144 km border with Afghanistan which runs from the tripoint with Turkmenistan to the tripoint with Tajikistan along the Amu Darya. In comparison, the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border is 1,357 km in length and runs from the tripoint with Uzbekistan in the west to the tripoint with China in the east, almost entirely along the Amu Darya, Pyanj and Pamir rivers all the way up to the Wakhan Corridor.

The Tajik-Afghan border is very difficult mountainous terrain to guard. The Russian-Uzbek-Tajik exercise envisaged the creation of special groups that can operate on their own or with the combat forces of mechanised infantry and reconnaissance, armour, artillery and other units, incorporating radio-electronic warfare crews and air defence, UAV, communication and guard units, etc.

The exercise simulated operations on enemy territory with the field units getting radio-electronic protection and guidance from mobile command centres regarding the enemy’s reconnaissance and on the use of smart weapons, attack drones, etc. [read more](#)

In the Russian assessment, the Biden Administration is manoeuvring to create an open-ended military presence in Afghanistan and to launch a hybrid war as in Syria. There is deep suspicion in Moscow as regards the US’ geopolitical intentions.

Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu hit out at the US recently:

“I can say one thing here, and it’s simply logical: why are you withdrawing if you basically stand there behind the fence, trying to look through the gaps to see what is going on over there? Why leave then? To literally remain on the border? The answer is absolutely clear: this is an attempt to take root in the Central Asian region...” [read more](#)

What is the “big picture”? A civil war in Afghanistan will sooner rather later lead to the creation of spheres of influence. Of course, the churning will be marked by much bloodshed and large scale internal displacement of hapless civilians.

The Saudi establishment daily Asharq Al-Awsat recently analysed the Syrian conflict:

“The Russian military view currently believes that Syrian forces are unable to control all parts of the country, citing a lack of human resources, the economic crises and intervention of foreign armies. Therefore, the “temporary solution” lies in the zones of influence: Reaching an agreement with Turkey over the northwest, an agreement with the US over the northeast, one with former fighters in the Free Syrian Army over the southwest and one with the government forces, Russia and Iran over the central-western regions.” [read more](#)

Shuffle the protagonists in Syria and the kaleidoscope will show how the Afghan mosaic may

look like in a near future: Afghan government in control shrinking to the capital and surrounding regions. Alas, countries such as Afghanistan or Syria, although ancient cultures, are of recent origin.

Unsurprisingly, Pakistan is resisting the [US pressure to open its border](#) and let in Afghan refugees. To my mind, Taliban is in reality doing Pakistan a great favour by initiating the closure of the southeast Chaman-Spin Boldak border crossing, which it captured from the Afghan government forces last month. [read more](#)

Pakistan has completed 90 percent of fencing along the 2,611-km long Durand Line. According to reports, the border barrier consists of two sets of chain-link fences separated by a 2-meter space that has been filled with concertina wire coils. The double fence is about 4 meters high. The military has installed surveillance cameras to check any movement along the border.

Equally, Russia and the Central Asian states are relatively safe so long as Kunduz and Takhar remain under Taliban control. Again, with the capture of Nimrod in the west by the Taliban, Iran also would have border security. The Taliban has given assurances to Afghanistan's neighbours.

The only exception is India. Afghanistan is a large country and it's about time that Indian analysts who root for the 'forever' war reflect over its possible break-up. [Russia has warned](#) that the risk of hostilities growing into a full-scale and prolonged civil war "has become harsh reality." If the civil war conditions aggravate, a Balkanisation of Afghanistan is in the cards.

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