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Afghanistan's significance for Russia in the 21st Century: Interests, Perceptions and Perspectives[1]

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Abstract: *Since President Barack Obama set the end of 2014 as the deadline to complete the planned troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, numerous commentators have sought to assess Russia's Afghan policy since September 11, 2001 and anticipate Moscow's strategy in 'post-2014' Afghanistan. This paper maintains that an assessment/evaluation of Afghanistan's significance for Russia in the current system of international relations is needed to understand Moscow's current and future Afghan strategy. Hence, the aim of this study is to identify and analyse the major factors, which lead to a conceptualization of Russia's interests in Afghanistan. When assessing Russia's interests in Afghanistan, one must take into account a plethora of significant issues, including Putin's 'great-power' rhetoric; geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economic rivalries in the wider region; security threats such as the illegal narcotics emanating from Afghanistan and global terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism; the rivalry and competition for energy resources; and control over pipeline routes and energy corridors. The analysis of these substantiating factors demonstrate why in the 21st century the Afghan problem remains a significant challenge to Russia's 'great power' identity, to its international strategy abroad, to its strategically important 'near abroad,' and to the country's domestic socio-economic policy.*

Keywords: ***Russia, Afghanistan, US, geopolitical, energy, terrorism***

Introduction

In 2009, President Barack Obama set the end of 2014 as the deadline to complete the US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan. Since Barack Obama's announcement, a number of commentators have attempted to explain Russia's role in

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Afghanistan since 2001. These include several analyses of Russia's Afghan strategy and foreign policy in the so-called 'post-2014' Afghanistan[2] and a number of studies[3] that sought to reflect on the post-Taliban stage of Russian-Afghan relations. However, no attempts were made to provide a clear overview of Russia's main interest in Afghanistan. A significant question, why Afghanistan matters for Vladimir Putin's Russia, remains unclear. Hence, this paper does not aim to explore or evaluate Russia's political, economic, and security policy in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Instead, this study maintains that, to understand Russian foreign policy in Afghanistan and Central Asia since September 11, 2001 and anticipate its future strategy, one must identify and analyse Russia's main interests in contemporary Afghanistan. Thus, the guiding research questions of this paper ask what Russia's main interests in Afghanistan are and why Afghanistan occupies an important place in Russian foreign policy thinking.

Vladimir Putin, in a 2012 pre-election article dedicated to foreign policy, discussed a number of significant challenges facing Russia's national security and foreign policy. These challenges include 'nuclear proliferation, regional conflicts and crises, terrorism and drug threat' (Putin 2012). It is noteworthy that all the issues mentioned by Putin were somehow related to Afghanistan. Although in his pre-election article Vladimir Putin stated that, 'Russia has obvious interests in Afghanistan', when it comes to Central Asia and especially to Afghanistan, Vladimir Putin's Russia has been unable to clearly and coherently articulate the country's foreign policy interests (Bakhtiarovich 2013; Putin 2012). By applying a constructivist approach to identity, foreign policy, and national interest, this paper aims to identify and analyse the main factors that lead to the conceptualization of Russia's national interests in Afghanistan.

Theoretical Framework

When discussing the interests of one state in another, Ted Hopf mentions the two most common interests: strategic and economic. Strategic interests, according to Hopf, involve threats and opportunities; the former involves danger to oneself, while the latter 'involves the possibility of averting danger through relations with others and collaborating for joint gains' (Hopf 2002: 16). Hopf (2002: 16) poses the fundamental questions of 'what constitutes a threat? and what constitutes an opportunity?' He claims that a theory is needed to capture

2 Wishnick 2014; Katz 2014; Stepanova 2013; Menkiszak 2011; Trenin-Kulakov-Malashenko 2014; De Haas 2014; Kazantsev 2012; Molchanov 2012; Konarovsky 2014; Kulikov 2013; Plastun 2013; Karyakin 2014; Povolotskii 2014; Nessar 2015.

3 For an overview of Russian-Afghan bilateral relations and analyses of Russia's 'Afghan strategy' since 2001, consult the following literature: Paterson 2010; Snetkov et al 2013; Tsygankov 2012, 2013; Trenin – Malashenko 2010; Stepanova 2007, 2012, 2013; Molchanov 2012; Laruelle 2009, 2011, 2013; Laruelle – Peyrouse – Axyonova 2013; Menkiszak 2011; Mendkovich 2012; Lang 2014; Kumar et al 2014; Smigielski 2010; Krickus 2011; Yakushik 2011; Kuhrt 2010; Korgun 2010.

the meaning of the two concepts. Hopf's (2002: 16) social cognitive theory of identity provides an 'account of how a state's own domestic identities constitute a social cognitive structure that makes threats and opportunities, enemies and allies, intelligible, thinkable and possible'. Concerning economic interests, by mentioning the example of US 'interest in Iranian natural gas reserves', he argues that the fact that there is no such thing as unalloyed economic interest makes the question of interest a very complex one. 'Every single question', Hopf (2002: 16) states, 'demands an understanding of the identity politics underlying US relations with the Middle East, Iran and Russia'. Similarly, when discussing Russia's interest in Afghanistan, one must understand the identity politics that underlines Moscow's complex and multidimensional relationships not only with the West as its significant Other but also with other regional players, such as China, India, and Iran, with whom Russia has developed competitive relationships. Furthermore, one must take into account the history of Russia's hegemonic position in the region and its priorities in the post-Cold War international order.

As Bobo Lo (2002) indicates, Russian foreign policy is too complicated to be placed in any single framework within the many 'fashionable paradigms' of Western theories of international relations. He notes that the 'complexities of Russian foreign policy require an approach that is broad in scope and conceptually based, rather than one that treats it as a compilation of discrete individual issue areas' (Lo 2002: 9). I am also in wholehearted agreement with Tsygankov (2010: 14) that international relations theories such as realism and liberalism largely ignore Russia's 'indigenous history and system of perceptions'. Indeed, they consider Russian foreign policy from the Western perspective and are 'developed in the West by the West for the West' and become problematic in a world that is 'multicultural and multilingual' (Tsygankov 2010: 14). Some have argued that the realist and neo-realist theories of international relations imagine the world in a very simplistic way (Reus-Smit 2005: 192), while others consider both the realist and liberalist theories as well as their neo versions as ideologically driven. Another significant problem with the realist and liberalist schools of international relations is the fact that they are mutually exclusive and tend to 'highlight one over the other', which makes them incapable of developing a 'comprehensive and complex explanatory framework' (Tsygankov 2010: 14).

In most traditional schools of international relations theory, international actors are considered 'atomistic egoists' whose interests are formed 'prior to social interaction' and are initiated purely by the desire for lucre and 'strategic purposes'. For constructivists, however, international actors are social beings whose identities and interests are formed by 'the products of inter-subjective social structure' (Reus-Smit 2005: 193); these are commonly held ideas, norms, culture, and knowledge (Checkel 1998). Granting the state human qualities, constructivists argue that, in the process of interaction with 'other members of

international society, nations develop affiliations, attachments and – ultimately – their own identity' (Tsygankov 2010: 15). Similar to post-positivists, constructivists claim that, throughout their interaction, states constantly 'produce and reproduce the social structures – cooperative or conflictual – that shape actors' identities and interests and the significance of their material contexts' (Wendt 1995: 81). Thus, the state is a cultural and social phenomenon.

Instead of simply assuming that they are rational or irrational, we must carefully study the formations of national interests since they are defined by their particular social context. Grasping the process of how actors develop their interests is vital in explaining various political phenomena in international politics that are largely 'ignored or misunderstood' by the traditional schools of thought. According to Wendt, 'identities are the basis of interests'; Wendt, like other constructivists, believes that the identity of states informs their interests and that their interests inform their actions (Wendt 1992: 398; Reus-Smit 2005: 199). Russia's national identity, settled during Putin's first term 'as maintaining international status' and being an aspiring 'great power', is the primary identity in its main interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia (Clunan 2009: 2010).

The Afghanistan Discourse in Vladimir Putin's Russia

Historically Russia, as a 'great power', had vied for power and influence in Afghanistan against its main adversaries, such as the British Empire in the 19th century and the US during the Cold War. After the disintegration of the USSR, the region's geopolitical order changed once again, and since the early 1990 s, Russia's main interest in Afghanistan has been related to its own 'War on Terror'. Russian politicians have always portrayed Russia as country that has struggled against Islamic fundamentalism, which entered the territory of the former Soviet Union through Afghanistan. Therefore, in 2001, when the US attacked the Taliban, Russia was very keen on becoming the US's main partner in the 'War on Terror'. According to Natasha Kuhrt, with the US's help, Russia hoped to curb the rising threat of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia and therefore allowed NATO to be based in its 'back yard', Central Asia. However, soon, Russian politicians and policymakers realized that the US was there to stay. As Natasha Kuhrt notes, the US had established 'bilateral relations with the Central Asian states with oil in mind, not Islamic fundamentalism' (Kuhrt 2010: 5; Duncan 2013: 130–131).

Ever since the failed attempts by Andrei Kozyrev and Boris El'tsin to integrate Russia into the West, distrust towards the US and its allies has been increasing in Russia, especially among the political elite who rose to power under Vladimir Putin. The 'Coloured Revolutions', seen by Russians as regime change operations funded and orchestrated by the US, and the war with Georgia in 2008 accelerated this trend. Most commentators, as well as practitioners and diplomats

within the Russian government, seem to be very certain about the 'fact' that the US and its allies are seriously focused on eliminating Russia's influence in the former Soviet Union. As Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Kisliak stated at a conference, 'we see attempts by the U.S. and other Western countries to strengthen their influence in the former Soviet Union'. Further, he declared that Russia is actually in favour of developing relations with the US and other Western countries as long as they do not work against Russia and take into consideration Russia's interests in the region (Felgenhauer 2008).

In particular, Russia's military establishment became very suspicious of the US presence in Central Asia; Russian commentators seemed infuriated by the idea of 'geo-political pluralism', advocated by Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997a, 1997 b), who argues that the US had to prevent the 'emergence of a hostile coalition that could challenge America's primacy'. According to Brzezinski's (1997a: 57, 61) 'geo-strategy for Eurasia', the US had to limit Russia's influence in Central Asia and focus on cooperation with China and Turkey instead of with Russia. It is important to note that, among Russian scholars and strategists, Brzezinski is considered the ideologue of US foreign policy thinking. His prominence in Russia owes much not only to his reputation as an anti-Soviet *apparatchik* with over 50 years of experience in Russophobic and anti-Russian activity in Washington but also to his elaboration of Halford J. Mackinder's 'Heartland' thesis, manifested in the book *The Grand Chessboard*, published in 1997. In this influential work, Brzezinski picks up on Mackinder's concept of a Eurasian 'pivot area', which supposedly includes all of Siberia, the greater part of Central Asia, and the Central East European region. Brzezinski (1997 b: 38) interprets the 'pivot area' as 'vital springboards for the attainment of continental domination'. According to Mackinder's theory, any actor, as long as it is a geopolitical object, that controls the 'Heartland', supposedly comprising the entire area ruled in 1904 by the Russian empire (except the Kamchatka Peninsula), possesses all the necessary economic and geopolitical means to dominate the 'World-Island', comprising the three interlinked continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe. According to Mackinder's theory, discussed in his 1919 book *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, 'who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the World' (Mackinder 1962/1919: 150; 1904/2004: 436).

Four decades later, Nicholas J. Spykman produced, according to Francis P. Sempa, an 'analysis and critique' of Mackinder's famous work, developing his own theory concerning the 'pivot area' and producing another version of this basic geopolitical model (in Spykman 1942/2007: xxvii). Spykman believed that the significance of the Heartland was overestimated in Mackinder's theory and that the real key to world domination was the 'Rimland'. In fact, Spykman modifies Mackinder's theory and argued that the Rimland, the strip of coastal land that encircles Eurasia, is the 'pivot area', vital for control of the Eurasian

continent, rather than the Heartland. Thus, Spykman (1944: 43) changes Mackinder's dictum and argues, 'Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world'.

The Central Asian region is part of the wider Heartland, and Afghanistan has been placed between the Heartland and Rimland; to be precise, northern Afghanistan is part of the Heartland and southern Afghanistan, beyond the Hindu Kush, is located within the Rimland.

Russia's political elite believe that international politics is guided by geopolitical precepts and therefore consider the struggle around Afghanistan and Central Asia in geopolitical terms. Eurasianists such as Alexander Dugin explain the presence of coalition forces in Afghanistan by maintaining that the 'Atlanticist forces' want to use the Rimland 'as a base for expanding deep into Eurasia to gain military-political and economic dominance over the continent' (Vertlib 2006). Indeed, despite the fact that the Russian ruling elite 'are indeed deeply divided in their reading' of Russia's foreign policy and security priorities, a large segment of its elite consider the Afghan issue from the "Duginist" geopolitical perspective and believe that the US is attempting to entrench itself in the IRAFPAK zone (Laruelle 2011: 4; Dobaev-Dugin 2005: 71–75). Since the fall of the Taliban, Russia's Afghan policy seems to have been incoherent, unclear, and very often undecided. On the one hand, Russia cooperated with the West and supported NATO's counterterrorism strategies. On the other hand, it has expressed concerns and criticisms, not only regarding the West's real intentions in the IRAFPAK zone but also concerning the West's failure to stabilise Afghanistan. Clearly, since 2001, a gap has existed between the official views promoted by the Kremlin and the elite discourse concerning Afghanistan. While many considered the US presence in Afghanistan a threat to Russia, officially, Moscow and Washington were partners in the 'War on Terror'. Boris Gromov, in charge of the Red Army when the Soviet Union withdrew its forces from the Hindu Kush in 1988–1989, and Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's ambassador to NATO, even insists that the US should not leave Afghanistan until it succeeds in its mission of completely eradicating the Taliban, Islamic fundamentalism, and terrorist groups (Gromov-Rogozin: 2010; Halbach 2013: 137). Despite this ambiguity in Russia's Afghanistan discourse, it seems that many in Russia's political elite view the US and its presence in the region from a geopolitical perspective, grounded in Mackinder's Heartland or Spykman's Rimland theory or, indeed, on any other version of this basic geopolitical model. As Wohlforeth (2006: 273) notes, when prominent Western thinkers such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, and George Friedman discuss the US foreign policy precisely in geopolitical terms, one should not be surprised when the Russians do the same.

There seems to be a rare consensus within the Russian ruling elite – policymakers, current and former strategists within the military establishment, and diplomats – that Afghanistan is the planet's 'geo-political nerve' and

a 'potential aircraft carrier' in the middle of one of the world's most important strategic regions.

Indeed, most Russians seem to be convinced that the US presence in Afghanistan is just part of their wider strategic aim to penetrate the Heartland and dominate the entire Eurasian continent. Russian commentators, such as Yurii Krupnov (2009), General Anatolii Kulikov (2013), Vladimir Paramanov (2013), Dmitrii Popov (2013), Gennadii Chufrin (2013), Aleksei Dundich (2013) and Aleksander Knyazev (2013) have repeatedly argued that the only reason for the US and NATO presence in Afghanistan is their goal to establish a geopolitical, geostrategic, geo-economic, and military 'bridgehead in the heart of Asia deploying a powerful network of military bases in Afghanistan and the Central East and Middle Asia as a whole' (Krupnov et al. 2008: 16). The 'War on Terror' and search for Osama bin Laden has always been an excuse to build up 'the U.S. and NATO military and organizational machine in the region and maintaining its open–ended presence there' (Krupnov et al. 2008: 16).

Influential and respected in Russia's expert community, strategist General Leonid Ivashov (2008) has declared that the US is in Afghanistan not to 'defend democracy and restore order' but to use Afghanistan as a 'strategic bridgehead to put pressure on China, Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia'.

Indeed, Russia often sees the struggles between other great powers, such as China and the US, for geopolitical and geo-economic domination in the Caspian region as part of their aspiration to achieve global hegemony (Marketos 2009: 8). US initiatives such as the 'Greater Middle East'[4] and 'Greater Central Asia'[5] projects are seen as geopolitical plots designed to tear away the former Soviet republics of Central Asia from Russia's sphere of influence and incorporate them into one region with Afghanistan, dominated by the US, thereby turning the entire region into a US protectorate.

The official line from Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs seems very quiet on this issue while emphasising the 'partnership' in the 'War on Terror' between Russia and the US. However, Dmitrii Rogozin (2012), despite substantially following the Kremlin's official stand, has occasionally hinted in his interviews that Afghanistan is strategically too important and therefore that it would be naïve to expect the US to leave the country and the region.

The respected Afghanist Vladimir Plastun in 2011 claimed that he never believed that the United States would ever withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, arguing that the US would use any possible excuse to remain in Afghanistan for a very long time. Even when the US had set a deadline for the withdrawal of its forces, it seemed that nobody in Russia believed those announcements.

4 As part of George W. Bush's 'forward strategy of freedom' agenda, this project was supposed to promote region-wide democracy.

5 The Greater Central Asia Partnership for Cooperation and Development (GCAP), a forum for the planning, coordination, and implementation of an array of US programs in the region.

The sceptics' doubts were confirmed when the US completed the building of large military super bases, the so-called multipurpose military airbases, which are equipped with air and space surveillance systems, enabling NATO forces to monitor air traffic over most of the Eurasian continent. This served as confirmation that the NATO forces are in Afghanistan to stay. In October 2013, Sergey Lavrov expressed Russia's concerns in an interview with *Russia Today*, noting, 'the information is that some nine quite fortified military bases are being constructed inside Afghanistan. We are asking questions about what is the purpose for this remaining presence'. Lavrov expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of transparency of the Americans concerning the purpose of their long-term military bases in Afghanistan (Lavrov 2013).

Since, in Russia's official rhetoric on national identity, the country is no more on its knees than it was during the 1990 s under the leadership of the Boris El'tsin but is instead a strong and rising power, a 'great power', it must confront or even counter any attempts by its formidable opponents to gain influence in a territory that has traditionally been in Russia's sphere of influence.

This discourse maintains that Russia, which aims at becoming 'a full-fledged member of a multipolar international order by 2020' (Tsygankov 2009: 352), must limit US influence in Afghanistan as well as throughout the Central Asian region. Afghanistan and especially the foreign powers 'entrenching' the Afghan soil are considered a potential threat to Russia's integrity and sovereignty. Hence, the issue of Afghanistan provides a context for constructing the view and image of the external threat and solidifies Vladimir Putin's official discourse of a great power being encroached upon by the significant Other and its allies.

Afghanistan's Significance for Russia's Regional Energy Policy

The Afghan problem is also important for Russia's energy and hydrocarbon strategy in Eurasia, which is primarily about Russia's access to region's energy resources and control over the trade, transportation, and communication corridors. As Roy Allison notes, post-Soviet Russia has perceived 'oil and gas resources as both a strategic asset and a strategic instrument in the Caspian Sea and Central Asia' (Allison 2004: 290). Central Asia not only contains vast hydrocarbon fields, both onshore and offshore in the Caspian Sea, that have the potential to serve as an alternative to OPEC suppliers of energy resources but is also one of the most important crossroads/intersections of the world's energy communications in the North-South and Europe-Asia directions (Dolgushev 2011: 91; Yinhong 2007: 161; Campbell 2013: 3). The main motivation behind Russia's involvement in the region is to maintain Russia's status as the main transit route for energy exports from Central Asia to Europe, in addition to limiting the influence of other players in 'Russia's own backyard' (Bergsager 2013: 9). Throughout the last decade, major Russian firms and corporations

have controlled most of the transportation infrastructure for Central Asia's oil, gas, and electricity towards the North and West.

One of the socially constructed images of Afghanistan since 1991 is that of a 'potential energy corridor'. This seems to be wishful thinking for most of the regional players except Russia. The West dreamed of connecting Central Asia to a warm water port to have direct access to region's hydrocarbons. In the 1990 s, Turkmenistan had a deal with the Taliban and the UNOCAL oil company to build a trans-Afghan pipeline into South Asia (Rashid 2010: 179). India and Pakistan both desperately seek to connect to Central Asia to solve their energy needs, especially in the case of India, which must explore ways of supporting its ever-growing economy and industry; this is a major aspect of its foreign policy (Rashid 2010: 179).

Since September 11, 2001, two alternative pipeline projects have been advanced: the US-backed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI)[6] pipeline and the China-backed Termez-Kabul-Peshawar-India (TKPI)[7] pipeline (Aziz 2007: 64). However, because of instability in Afghanistan, the feasibility of both projects remains in question. The United States has also attempted to promote Afghanistan's role as an 'economic land bridge' between Central Asia and South Asia by promoting a broader vision for the Central Asian region called the 'Silk Route Strategy'; this project involves not only pipelines but also large-scale infrastructure projects that would unite the region (Kuchins 2010, 2011: 77; Rashid 2013).

What is noteworthy about these projects is that they all exclude Russia and are considered by many a potential threat to Russia's dominant and hegemonic position within the Central Asian energy infrastructure. Russia has always been interested in consolidating its 'leadership in the emerging system of interstate political and economic relations in Central Asia' by dominating these states'

6 The aforementioned TAPI is the most ambitious of all the proposed projects to transport Turkmen energy southwards. It is worth $7.6 billion and would be 1,040 miles (2,000 km) long, stretching from the Dauletabad gas fields in southern Turkmenistan all the way to India, passing through the Herat, Helmand, and Kandahar provinces of Afghanistan (Palau 2012). From there, it would extend to the Pakistani cities of Quetta and Multan, and the pipeline would end in the Indian town of Fazilka, on the Indo-Pakistani border. Although the long-standing tensions between India and Pakistan as well as those between Pakistan and Afghanistan call the feasibility of this project into question, many experts have not lost faith in the so-called 'project of the century'. Since 2009, the countries involved have been discussing alternative routes by 'circumnavigating the more dangerous areas of Afghanistan by redirecting the pipeline to Gwadar in southern Pakistan, near the border with Iran' (Petersen-Barysch 2011: 54).

7 In 2013, China proposed an alternative to the US-backed TAPI. The gas pipeline would transfer Turkmen gas via northern Afghanistan to China (Halbach 2013: 145). While Russia attempts to maintain its control over the pipelines of Central Asia, China aims to turn Afghanistan into a vital part of its energy infrastructure, which would connect China to Central Asia and to Iran and Pakistan. I am in agreement with Thrassyvoulos N. Marketos that China's financial strength has allowed it to buy significant energy assets in Afghanistan, thereby securing 'for itself not just energy flows but key strategic advantages for years to come' (Marketos 2009: 17).

strategic, political, and economic affairs (Yuldasheva 2007: 41). Some experts also claim that Russia is interested in preventing any actors from succeeding in establishing an energy corridor through Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean and will attempt to restrict any plans to create a transportation axis that would connect Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan via Afghanistan and Pakistan (Trenin 2012: 230; Kuchins 2010, 2011). Indeed, Dmitri Trenin (2010: 230) argues that the Kremlin's policies in the region are based on two main imperatives: to prevent the construction of any new gas pipelines bypassing Russia (or constructed through the shelf of the Caspian Sea) and to avoid any kind of military presence in other states except the coastal ones. Experts such as Jeffrey Mankoff (2009), Andrew Kuchins (2010, 2011), and Aleksei Malashenko (2012: 112–113) have argued that instability in Afghanistan is in Russia's interests because it is impossible to build pipelines while the country is in a state of war and chaos.

According to John Foster many prominent US think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution, Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, and the Heritage Foundation, have openly analysed the competition for pipelines, the so-called 'New Great Game in Central Asia', which they consider a 'geopolitical game among the world's Great Powers for control of energy resources' (2008: 10). This is the reason that many in Russia strongly believe that Central Asia and the Caspian region are of great significance for the United States' current framework of its geostrategic interests concerning specific energy issues. However, US authorities have also officially stated that this region is the sphere of American strategic interests because of United States energy security' (Dolgushev 2011: 91). Donald Rumsfeld's statement that it is in the US's interests to ensure access to the key markets and strategic resources of the planet is very often mentioned in Russian literature and media (Morozov 2010). Another quote frequently mentioned in Russia is attributed to Madeleine Albright: 'it is unfair that Russia owns Siberia'. While no one can provide a reference for this quote, it is very often used to promote Moscow's perspective. Serbian director Emir Kusturica mentioned the quote when he voiced his support for Russia's actions in Ukraine and Crimea in March 2014 (Kusturica 2014). As far as Russians are concerned, US never stopped planning a possible transportation corridor linking Central Asia to South Asia through Afghanistan, disregarding Russia's national interests. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, Zbigniew Brzezinski's argument that Caspian oil should be torn away from Russia, thereby eliminating any possibility of Russia's reintegrating into a post-Soviet empire, is often used to justify Russia's special interest in the region.

Because of its geocentric position, Afghanistan is located at the crossroads of the world's richest oil and gas regions, such as those of Saudi Arabia, Mosul (Iraq and Iran), the Caspian region and Central Asia, the Volga-Urals, and West Siberia. These regions contain a unique concentration of nearly 80 per cent of the planet's hydrocarbon reserves (Morozov 2010). It is widely believed that

the US presence in the region guarantees not only access to all these riches but also control over its formidable competitors, such as Russia, China, and Iran. Shi Yinhong emphasises the two main objectives of the US in the region. These are to 'guard against the expansion of Russian power' within the CIS and compete with Russia for influence within Central Asia and to guard against China (Yinhong 2007: 164). In Russia's elite discourse, it is natural that the US desires a constant military presence in the region, particularly in Afghanistan. Therefore, they believe that the issue of Afghanistan should play an important role in Russia's current geostrategy with regard to the region's hydrocarbons. As one of the key players in the 'New Great Game', Russia should treat the US 'as a serious challenger to Russia throughout Central Asia and the greater Caspian region' (Kanet 2010: 81).

Russia's Economic Interests in Afghanistan

Russia's economic interests in Afghanistan are often underestimated or completely neglected. First, Russia is trying to develop a single economic zone in which Central Asia will play an important role. This will make the union's economy vulnerable to an Afghan threat. Second, Afghanistan is rich in mineral resources; according to one report, Afghanistan's untapped mineral deposits could exceed a trillion dollars. The report is based on geological exploration work completed by the Soviet Union in the 1960 s and 1970 s. It claims that Afghanistan has significant deposits of aluminium, iron ore, molybdenum, cobalt, gold, silver, copper, niobium, fluorspar, beryllium, and lithium (Alexander 2010). According to another report issued by the US military and geological experts, Afghanistan could be 'part of the long term solution to the Rare Earth Elements (REE) supply problem' (Dawd 2013). In 2010, the Pentagon classified a document calling Afghanistan the 'Saudi Arabia of Lithium' (Risen 2013), and following these reports, many Russian experts and Afghanists, including Yurii Krupnov, Victor Korgun, and Zamir Kabulov, have called on the Russian government and corporations to invest in Afghanistan and play a larger role in regional dynamics.

Since 2001, numerous plans and negotiations for bilateral partnerships have been discussed by Russia and Afghanistan. Future projects involved the reconstruction of industrial enterprises and infrastructure mostly built by Soviet engineers and specialists in the second half of the 20th century, as well as Russia's participation in a large-scale humanitarian de-mining campaign (Korgun 2004: 117). The Afghans were interested in offering Russia the opportunity to reconstruct the famous Kabul house-building factory, the Janagalak repair plant, which was a key component of Afghanistan's infrastructure for many years, Mazari-e-Shariff's bread factory, and a fertilizer plant. Moreover, both sides considered cooperating on the reconstruction of Afghanistan's main roads,

which were also built by the Soviets in the 1960 s and 1970 s. The construction of new power plants and power lines was also negotiated. Two nations were keen on Russia's large-scale involvement in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, as 80% of all Afghanistan's industry and enterprises, consisting of 142 large--scale projects, had been initiated and realized by the Soviet Union. Therefore, after 2001, Russia genuinely believed that, unlike other major players in post--Taliban Afghanistan, such as China, India, and the US, Russia had not only the appropriate technologies but also the technical and economic expertise, along with specific experience in the construction and operation of large-scale development projects in Afghanistan. This, many believed, was an advantage that would compensate for Russia's inability to donate cash to Afghanistan and ensure an equal partnership with the West. However, these were rare exceptions: most of the bilateral meetings and negotiations held by Russia and Afghanistan were concerned with what Russia *could* do rather than what Russia *would* do, and the talks were usually dominated by empty rhetoric, promises, and bilateral declarations of intent. One of the main reasons for Russia's ambiguous and contradictory behaviour concerning Afghanistan's reconstruction was a lack of funds and the long-term credit necessary to undertake development projects in Afghanistan. As Ekaterina Stepanova notes, Russia companies operating in Afghanistan had become dependent on international donors and foreign partners (Stepanova 2007: 76). Very often, these partners and international donors were not keen on involving Russia in any significant projects, and the role of Russian companies would have been limited to subcontracting and transportation (Stepanova 2007: 76).

Russian experts and Afghanists are convinced that Russia has lost its economic battle with China over Central Asia and Afghanistan. Afghanistan's Aynak copper mine, which is considered the world's largest untouched copper reserve, is a good example of where Russia has lost the opportunity to benefit. By various estimates, the mine has copper reserves worth nearly 100 billion US dollars. In 2009, a Chinese company, China Metallurgical Group, won the exploration rights for the Aynak copper mine. Under the terms of the deal, China will pay Afghanistan a total of 25 billion dollars, and experts have estimated the future profit from Aynak at around 80 billion US dollars. The fact that it was Soviet geologists who discovered the Aynak copper, conducted massive exploration work that resulted in the creation of 1,300 maps of the area, and even started to develop the Aynak reserves, yet it is now the Chinese and Americans who will reap the benefits, makes many Russians feel extremely uncomfortable. Since 2003, the Russian government has numerous times voiced their disapproval of the US's unilateral decisions and deliberate exclusion of Russian companies from Afghanistan's contracting process (Stepanova 2007, 2012, 2013).

Security Threats and Islamic Fundamentalism

Another reason that Afghanistan is highly important for Russia is its potential to destabilise the entire Central Asian region. In particular, Russia is concerned about possible spill-overs of Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, and Afghan-style 'warlordism' into Central Asia. Another socially constructed image of Afghanistan that has been developed since the early 1990 s is Afghanistan as a source of instability and Islamic fundamentalism, which could 'Afghanise'[8] (*afganizatsiia*) the region. In addition, the people and the governments of Russia and the Central Asian republics have come to believe that the Islamic terrorist threat stems from the activities of Islamic fundamentalist movements based in Afghanistan.

It is often argued by commentators that the real threats emanating from Afghanistan have been exaggerated and often economically and politically motivated (Kazemi 2012). However, one should not ignore the fact that most of the radical Islamic terrorist groups and Islamic fundamentalists active in Central Asia throughout the last two decades have been supported, managed, ideologically encouraged, and funded by entities outside Central Asia, namely some of the Gulf states, and reached Central Asia and Russia via Pakistan and Afghanistan (Rashid 2002: 55, 141, 223; 2009; 2010; 2013). An Afghanistan Analyst report claimed that thousands of IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) fighters are hiding in the northern and southern provinces of Afghanistan, including Balkh, Faryab, and Kunduz, all bordering Central Asia. Others claim that the bulk of the IMU fighters are in Pakistan, waiting for their chance to pass through Afghanistan and take over Uzbekistan, turning it into an Islamic state under sharia law (Ruttig 2013).

Furthermore, Islamic fundamentalists, madrassa and university students, jihadists, and members of radical Islamic groups from all over Central Asia and CIS can be found in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They are people who have attended and who still attend the Taliban's terrorist and extremist training camps, funded by wealthy sheikhs from the Gulf States. Some of these militants went to Central Asia and Afghanistan to fight for jihad and Islam against the US, and, as Ahmad Rashid argues, they are returning to the Central Asian republics. David Satter (2013) quotes Ahmad Rashid as saying that 'they have done enough fighting for other people. They want to fight for their own country... They are trying to infiltrate weapons, ammunition and men back into Central Asia'. Since 2001, there has been a boom of radical groups within Central Asia, particularly in the Fergana Valley. These groups include not only older organisations with clear links to al-Qaeda and international terrorist networks such as the banned-in-Russia cult Hizb ut-Tahrir movement (Mamirgov 2007: 417), the Islamic

8 Many respondents interviewed by the author used the term *Afgzanizatsiia*, which means 'Afghanisation'.

Movement of Uzbekistan (Duncan 2013: 130), and the Islamic Jihad Union but also smaller groups such as Islam Lashkarliary (Warriors of Islam), Tabligh (Mission), Uzun Sakal (Long Beard), Noor (Ray of Light), Adolat Uyushamsi (Justice Society), and Tovba (Repentance) (Malashenko 2007: 94–95). Although they are small movements and do not pose any immediate threat, they are radical enough to take up arms at any time. These groups are 'regaining strength and, in the opinion of analysts, preparing for a long, sustained military campaign in Central Asia' (Satter 2013). Since 2015 there are widespread speculations in the media that the ISIS forces are gaining ground in Afghanistan and are preparing to proceed further to Central Asia.

This could lead to the destabilisation of Central Asia, and any destabilisation in weak countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, or 'the most dangerous Uzbekistan' will inevitably have 'immediate repercussions' in Russia. As Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov stated in an interview with KUNA, Kuwait's news agency, on June 18, 2013.

Developments in Central Asia are directly linked to the Russian national security. You are right that today's processes in Afghanistan seriously affect the entire situation in the region. There is a threat of its destabilization. Even more so that ethnic Uzbek and Tajik extremist and terrorist groupings in the north of IRA are already working on plans to penetrate territories of Central Asian countries.

Ted Donnelly (2011) observes that a careful strategic analysis of the Central Asian region demonstrates that Central Asia is inseparably linked, strategically as well as operationally, to Afghanistan. It is certain that strategic success in Afghanistan is critical to strategic (not just operational) success in Central Asia and vice versa (Donnelly 2011: 13). Therefore, Russia is interested in a stable Central Asia and, as Marlène Laruelle (2009: 7) argues, control of energy resources and maintaining regional security are Russia's two major goals in the region. Hence, the issue of 'security is a key domain of Russia's presence in Central Asia' (Laruelle 2009: 7). Since the regional security issues are directly correlated to Russia's domestic security, this serves as a strong factor in Moscow's continued presence in the region.

Many in Russia are indeed worried that the Fergana Valley will turn into an area resembling Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). There is indeed a danger that the Fergana Valley will become a FATA-like ungoverned space, which will serve as a 'safe haven, breeding ground and staging area for violent extremist organizations and militants' (Donnelly 2011: 18). The extremist groups mentioned above will be able to use 'this safe haven, as well as reconstituted rear areas in Afghanistan, to increase Islamist insurgent pressure on secular Central Asian governments' (Donnelly 2011: 18). However, from a Russian perspective, if this scenario were to happen, then it would certainly be a part of a larger plan by the ant-Russian coalition, consisting of the United

States and its allies in the Gulf, to ensure the spread of so-called *upravliaemyi khaos* (controlled chaos), already successfully implemented by the US and NATO in countries such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan. As several high profile Russian officials and academics interviewed for this study noted, 'Yesterday Iraq, today Syria and tomorrow Russia'; to prevent this, Russia must implement a variety of preventive measures.

Drug Trafficking/Illegal Narcotics

The fact that Afghanistan remains the world's largest producer and supplier of cannabis, raw opium and heroin (Oliphant 2013: 9–11) is the last but not least important reason why Afghanistan occupies a significant place in Russian foreign policy thinking. Moscow is interested in improving security in Afghanistan and Central Asia since it is greatly concerned with the scale of the influx of Afghan heroin and hashish. Indeed, the issue of illegal narcotics has become one of the major challenges in Russia's recent history.

The threat posed by illegal narcotics has been growing steadily and surely for the last two decades. Once one of the main hubs for the transit of drugs towards the West, Russia has become one of the main consumers of Afghan drugs (Malashenko 2012: 110–111, 117). As Director of the Federal Drug Control Service (FDCS) of Russia Victor Ivanov has declared numerous times: Russia is the world's biggest consumer of Afghan heroin. According to some estimates, 150,000 people die annually as a result of heroin used in post-Soviet republics (Chernenko 2012). In Russia's official documents, the problem of *narkomaniia* (drug addiction) or *narkougroza* (narcothreat) has been declared an issue of national security rather than a health problem or a law-enforcement issue (Dorofeev 2011: 94). Victor Ivanov once said that 'Afghan drug traffic is like a tsunami constantly breaking over Russia – we are sinking in it' (War on Drugs 2012). The scale of damage to Russia is indeed alarming. There are between one and two million drug addicts in the Russian Federation, most of whom live on crime. In addition, because of the lack of coherent and progressive drug policy, an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 drug addicts die every year from drug-related deaths such as AIDS and overdose. Because heroin production has increased by 40 times since the coalition forces entered Afghanistan in 2001, many Russians believe that this has been done purposefully to maximize the damage to Russia since Russia is the largest consumer of Afghan heroin and cannabis (Syroezhkin et al. 2011: 359–364). Vladimir Putin in 2005 accused coalition forces in Afghanistan of 'sitting back and watching caravans haul drugs across Afghanistan to the former Soviet Union and Europe' (Radyuhin 2008). In addition, in the pre-election article dedicated to foreign policy mentioned earlier, he addressed the issue of illegal narcotics and claimed that drug trafficking has become one of the most serious threats facing Russia. He stated that drugs not

only 'undermine the gene pool of the whole nation but also create a ground/basis for corruption and crime'. Putin also noted that Afghan drug production is increasing every year and that, in 2011 alone, production rose by 40 per cent. According to Vladimir Putin (2012), Russia faces a real heroin threat, causing huge damage to the health of Russia's citizens.

The revenue from drugs trade is used to fund extremists and terrorist activities not only in Afghanistan but also in Central Asia. It has been reported that the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), the Islamic Party of Turkmenistan, the East Turkestan Liberation Organization, and other extremist groups are also benefiting from the drug trade. The ancient Silk Road has turned into a 'heroin route', which is, as an UNDOC (2009: 4) report expresses, a path of 'death and violence' running through a strategically important and volatile region. The report also refers to the alarming and ugly combination of drugs, Islamic fundamentalists, and crime as 'the Perfect Storm', and this storm is blowing towards Russia; therefore, it is in Russia's interest to play a larger role in the Afghan problem to address Afghanistan's ever-growing drug production or at least restrict the import and transit of illegal narcotics to Central Asia and into Russia.

Conclusion

As this study has shown, in Moscow's view, because of its geographic and geostrategic location, Afghanistan continues to be an important focus of all the major players in international politics. The Russian establishment has always believed that, in its quest for world dominance, the US consistently seeks to increase its military presence in this strategically important region. Despite the official discourse of Russia being the West's partner in the 'War on Terror', many Russians see the US presence in Afghanistan as part of a larger plan by NATO and the US to encroach upon Russia. Russia's elite discourse is dominated by the notion that Afghanistan is pivotal in relations among regional actors such as Russia, the US, China, Iran, Turkey, India, and Pakistan and that it is the geopolitical nerve of the whole planet. Hence, Afghanistan plays a vital role in Russia's constant geographic strategy formulation, which is mainly concerned with the dominance of Eurasia and former Soviet territory, which is vital for Russia's 'great power' identity.

Russia seems to be very concerned about the prospect of NATO's long-term presence in the region. Due to their Hobbesian view of international relations, large segment of Russian political elite believe that in order to survive as a country, restore its strategic influence in the world, and be recognized as a great power, Russia must limit the influence of the US in the wider region, which includes Afghanistan and its surroundings. By emphasising the socially constructed reality, the constructivist theory maintains that ideas directly or indirectly influence the construction of the political agenda as well as affect the

way in which political actors deal with each other. As Emanuel Adler (1997: 324) argues, 'the identities, interests and behaviour of political agents are socially constructed by collective meaning, interpretations and assumptions about the world'. The idea concerning Afghanistan is that Russia's historic role in Afghanistan and the wider region involves containing the penetration of hostile foreign powers, in this instance NATO, headed by the United States, into the region, which traditionally had been in Russia's sphere of influence.

Russia desires to preserve its special relationship with Central Asia, its 'backyard', not only in the political, economic, security, and defence senses but also in the cultural and even linguistic spheres. Furthermore, Moscow wants to retain maximum control of the Central Asian hydrocarbons and their transit routes, ensure Russia's participation in energy projects such as TAPI and the development and exploration of mineral deposits such as lithium and copper, and secure access to the Central Asian and Afghan market for Russian goods. Therefore, Moscow must play a major role in competition and cooperation surrounding Afghanistan and develop competitive relations with other involved actors and players. Finally, according to Moscow's neo-Eurasian doctrine, Russia must keep the region's economies in line with its economic system and achieve their integration with the Eurasian Economic Union.

Security issues and regional stability also play a major role in Russia's current foreign policy interests in Afghanistan. As mentioned earlier, international terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism are considered major security threats. Hence, Afghanistan must also retain a prominent role in Russia's attempts to maintain its influence and presence in the region to hamper the Islamisation of Central Asia and prevent the penetration of radical Islam into Russia. Finally, Afghanistan's opium and hashish production and its illegal traffic to Russia via Central Asia have become one of the most challenging problems faced by post--Soviet Russia. The Afghan–Central Asia–Russia-EU Northern drug route has created an array of informal networks that have contributed enormously to ever--growing corruption and crime in Russian Federation and the region in general.

A careful analysis of all these substantiating factors demonstrate that, in the 21st century, once again, the Afghan problem has become a significant challenge to Russia's international strategy abroad, to its strategically important 'near abroad', and to its domestic socio-economic policy.

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