

## **Regional Powers Fuel Afghan Instability**

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Iran, India and Russia have long backed the continuation of armed conflict in Afghanistan.

It is a decade since the Soviet Union was evicted from Afghanistan, having lost 15,000 soldiers and billions of dollars worth in military equipment and Kabul government subsidies. In recent years, Soviet adventurism has been superseded by Russian territorial concerns, with Moscow's stumbling war against Chechen rebels prompting it to direct its gaze towards Afghanistan once more.

Moscow accuses the Taleban and al-Qaeda of training and arming the Chechens. In March this year, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, President Putin's special advisor on Chechnya, went as far as to threaten air strikes against the Kabul regime after claiming that Osama bin Laden's terrorist network was training anti-Russian militants at a camp near Mazar-e-Sharif.

Moscow is terrified of the Taleban attacking its "soft underbelly", the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. These countries are home to hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians and several Russian military airfields. The Kremlin fears a refugee influx and the loss of its bases, if parts of these countries fell to elements sympathetic to the Taleban.

Yastrzhembsky's threat came to nothing. Russia's air force is too ramshackle for precision air strikes and its population highly suspicious of anything that suggests a return to military involvement in Afghanistan.

Anyway, until recently, Moscow had a convenient proxy for its Afghan policy in the shape of the Northern Alliance, led by the late "Lion of Panjshir", Ahmed Shah Massoud and ousted Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Clinging to the Panjshir valley by their fingernails, the Northern Alliance was dismissed as a busted flush prior to the September 11 attacks. Now they are touted as a crucial ingredient of a post-Taleban government.

Moscow has categorically ruled out any possibility of the Taleban playing a part in any future Afghan administration, in spite of US and Pakistani attempts to recruit moderate leaders of the Pashtun-dominated movement.

In October, Putin announced the shipment of 30-40 million US dollars worth of arms to strengthen the alliance's hand. The help was no great surprise, since convoys of ex-Soviet tanks, armoured personnel carriers and howitzers have regularly trundled through Tajikistan to Afghan opposition territory since 1995.

But the aid was announced just as Washington itself was questioning the wisdom of re-equipping a force that is as likely to wreak revenge on Taleban supporters - so extending the war - as achieving US military goals.

Until now, Putin has expressed commitment to Washington's "War on Terrorism", as a way of both protecting Russia's southern flank and defeating its Chechen rebels. But this support could ebb if Pakistan, the USA and UK insist on a Taleban presence in any political settlement.

Indira Gandhi gently chided the USSR for its 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, but stopped well short of outright condemnation. Moscow and New Delhi have been firm friends since the Sixties and their Afghan policies have mirrored one another since the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

New Delhi fears that the Taleban will inflame radical Islamic sentiment at home and upset the secular fabric of the nation. Most importantly, it is highly suspicious of the Taleban's connection with its arch rival Pakistan, which it accuses of "sub-contracting" the movement to train militants infiltrated into Indian-held Kashmir.

Like Moscow, New Delhi found a useful proxy in the Northern Alliance, many of whose leaders fled to India during the Taleban's sweep across Afghanistan. The alliance has also offered to close the infamous terrorist training camps should they defeat the Taleban. In return, India has offered military assistance, though not on Russia's scale, and a large field hospital.

And like Moscow, New Delhi is suspicious of Taleban participation in a future Afghan government. It is anxious to give Pakistan as little say as possible in Afghan affairs, and by doing this, hopes to get a Kabul administration more sympathetic to its own concerns.

The Afghan opposition is also backed by Tehran. Relations between Shia Iran and the Sunni Taleban were always frosty because of the threat the latter posed to the former's eastern border. Tehran was also suspicious that Mullah Omar's regime followed an agenda drawn up by Saudi Arabia, its chief rival in the region.

Iran had striking firsthand experience of the Taleban threat in August 1998 when the movement occupied the Iranian embassy in Mazar-e-Sharif, executing three diplomats and six journalists. The killings sent 200,000 Islamic Revolutionary Guard troops to the Afghan border where they conducted live-fire "exercises" until the tensions died down.

Relations have been sour ever since. Tehran increased its support for its own Afghan proxy, Hezb-i-Wahdat (Unity Party), a collection of warlords drawn from Hazara Shias who inhabit central and northern Afghanistan. In January 1996, Iran pushed Hezb-i-Wahdat under the umbrella of Rabbani and the Northern Alliance.

Tehran has supplied financial and military assistance to the Northern Alliance on a massive scale. In late 1998, a freight train carrying 700 tonnes of Iranian ammunition for Massoud was intercepted in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, providing an insight into the scale of regional gunrunning.

Although it has been less outspoken about the future composition of an Afghan government, Iran, like Russia and India, has little love for the Taleban, moderate or otherwise.

All three countries, however, have long backed the continuation of armed conflict in Afghanistan, in the belief that a weak and divided government in Kabul poses no threat to their own interests and goals.

Whatever vocal diplomatic support they may give to the US "War on Terrorism", it is unlikely to dramatically alter their tendency to support rival Afghan factions and warlords.

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**Location:** Uzbekistan  
Turkmenistan  
Tajikistan  
Stavropol

**Focus:** Central Asia

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