

**Confidential**

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# RUSSIA

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Published monthly in Russian and in English  
by Trialogue Company Ltd.

Issue № 1 (229), vol.15. January 2016

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February 22, 2016

Vadim Kozyulin reports from Moscow:

## THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY: MOSCOW IN SEARCH OF NEW ALLIES

### SUMMARY

Until recently, Russia was almost the only major power trying to avoid any contacts with the radical movement of Taliban. Its contacts in Afghanistan were limited strictly to the legitimate government, and that position of Moscow seemed hard and fast. Late in 2015, however, Russian Special Envoy for Afghanistan Mr. Zamir Kabulov surprised the world with a statement about Moscow's contacts with the Taliban.

What has opened the door for a Moscow-Taliban dialogue and should we expect Russia to develop a new strategy and policy in relation to Afghanistan? While previously the controlled instability in that country generally served Russia's interests, today, as the threat of Islamic State (IS) is growing, such model is about to come to an end, believes Vadim Kozyulin, PIR Center's Senior Research Fellow. If desired, Russia can become a key player in Afghanistan, as it has done in Syria; start building an anti-IS coalition; reinforce its influence in Central Asia and set up stable channels of communication with the Taliban. Furthermore, the threat of fall of Kabul is a real driver to resume the Russia-EU cooperation, believes the expert.

However, the development of the situation will depend both on the position of external players and their ability to come to an agreement, and on Russia's real desire to take up the initiative in the Afghan issue.

Late in 2015, Russian Special Envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov surprised the world with a statement about Moscow's contacts with the *Taliban*. "The interests of the *Taliban* even without stimulation objectively coincide with ours," said the diplomat. "The Afghan and the Pakistani *Taliban* said they would not recognize the self-proclaimed caliph of Islamic State Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as their caliph, and would not recognize *ISIS*. It is really important."

➤ *The observers became concerned that the Kremlin would end contacts with the government in Kabul and would make stake on the Taliban victory.*

The relations between Moscow and the new President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani, perceived by Moscow as an American henchman and a weak leader, clearly were not good from the beginning. The only time when Ghani met Putin, on the margins of the SCO summit in Ufa in the summer of 2015, the parties confined themselves to generalities. By contrast, the Russian leaders met Hamid Karzai much more frequently and warmly, even after his retirement. Possibly, the thing is that on 30 September 2014, the next day after the inauguration of Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, Afghanistan signed two security and defense cooperation agreements with the United States and NATO. Moscow perceives these agreements as a tool for Washington to expand its military presence not only in Afghanistan, but also in Central Asia. Still, Russia had to support UN Security Council Resolution No. 2189, whereby the NATO-led *Resolute Support* mission received a one-year mandate with a possibility of extension.

#### AFGHANISTAN - AWAITING WAR AGAIN; IS - BUILDING CALIPHATE AGAIN

Afghanistan has been permanently at war, with on average 30 persons (including 15-20 soldiers) killed by terrorists every day. Having failed to address the issue of terrorism with military means, the United States are trying to involve the *Taliban* in state governance. The *reconciliation process* initiated in Afghanistan by the United States and taken up by the Afghan government gives the *Taliban* an opportunity to peacefully seize the power in the country. The Talibs do not hurry to take advantage of this opportunity though, linking their involvement in peaceful negotiations to the United Nations excluding the grouping from the list of terrorist organizations. Meanwhile, Pakistan has been using inter-Afghan negotiations with moderate Talibs to appoint Pakistan-controlled Talibs to the key offices.

➤ *Islamic State (IS) managed to sow discord within the Taliban: during the period of anarchy, after Mullah Omar died, some Pashtuns (an ethnic group in Afghanistan, which forms the backbone of the Taliban) were recruited by IS. Firstly, an IS fighter earns 3 to 10 times more than a Taliban, and, secondly, IS follows the path of Al-Qaeda whose philosophy fed the Taliban in its early version.*

There are different rumors about *IS* fighters' coming to Afghanistan: e.g. recently a secret movement of *IS* fighters from the *Taliban*-controlled Tribal Areas in Pakistan to training camps in north Afghanistan was investigated at the Afghan Parliament. The Pakistani intelligence agencies and some Afghan security officials are believed to be involved in this activity, with Saudi Arabia and Qatar being sponsors, thus training Sunni fighters in Afghanistan for anti-Shia battlegrounds all over the world.

➤ *It is likely that Russia's air forces in the Syrian sky created a new cost item in the budget of IS sponsors, and now Russia, with its close ties to Iran, is viewed as another target, in addition to Yemen, Syria and Iraq.*

The other part of *IS* fighters is formed by those who have pledged allegiance to the organization, clearly driven by financial incentives, such as the remainders of the *Islamic movement of Uzbekistan*, the Uyghur movements from China, the Chechens, the Tatars and other *freedom fighters* who had settled in Northern Afghanistan long ago.

Qatar money (Qatar sponsors *IS*, *inter alia*, to protect its gas markets threatened by the project of TAPI gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India) made even the Afghan Turkmen pledge allegiance to *IS*. Having lived in peace with the government of Turkmenistan until recently, they made several sallies at the border in December 2014. At that time, Moscow and the CSTO were ready to send their forces to assist Turkmenistan. However, the country's leaders managed to recover from the shock and rejected all Kremlin proposals.

- *In 2015, the total count of IS fighters in Afghanistan reached 3,500, believes Zamir Kabulov. But the number of IS sympathizers in the country can reach several dozens of thousands of persons.*
- *The Kremlin sees a particular threat coming from the nationals of Russia and CIS member states, who are fighting now in Syria and Iraq. According to FSB (Russian Federal Security Service), the number of IS supporters holding a Russian passport has reached 2,900 persons. On this indicator, Russia ranks second in the world, after Tunisia with 3,000 persons leaving the country to join the IS.*

## IS Fighters from Former USSR Republics

No	Country	Number of fighters	Source of Information
1	Russia	2400 1800	Sergey Smirnov, 1 <sup>st</sup> Deputy of Russian FSB Vladimir Kolokoltsev, Russian Minister of Internal Affairs
2	Kazakhstan	400	Nurlan Ermekbayev, Secretary of Kazakhstan Security Council
3	Tajikistan	300	Yusuf Rakhmonov, Tajikistan General Prosecutor
4	Uzbekistan	200-500	Uzbekistan Officials and Uzbekistan Radio Liberty
5	Kyrgyzstan	382	Nikolay Bordyuzha, CSTO Secretary General
6	Turkmenistan	300-400	International Crisis Group
	Total from Central Asian Republics	3000	Sergey Smirnov, 1st Deputy of Russian FSB
	<u>Total</u>	<u>3382-5400</u>	
	IS in Total	30.000	CIA
		200.000	Iraq authorities



Table 1. *IS* Fighters from Former USSR Republics. Sources specified in the table.

"If [they] get stronger, winning there, they will inevitably come here to sow fear and hatred, to stage blasts, to kill and torture people," noted Vladimir Putin in his Annual Address to the Federal Assembly in December 2014. "And we

must meet and eliminate them at distant approaches." The rates of growth of the number of *IS* fighters originating from Russia suggest that very soon Russia may turn out to rank first (while in September 2015 FSB estimated the number of Russians at *IS* at 2,400, today they are already 2,900).

#### TALIBAN AT MARRIAGEABLE AGE

Until recently, Russia was, perhaps, the only (but for India) major power that avoided contacts with the Talibs. Two years ago Kabulov said that Moscow had taken a firm stance: no contacts with the *Taliban* in Afghanistan, but with the legitimate government only. The door for a dialogue with the *Taliban* was opened for Russia by the Americans, thanks to their own example and unique interpretation of terrorism: having acknowledged the Pakistani *Taliban* to be a terrorist organization, they prefer the term *armed insurgency* to refer to the Afghan *Taliban*.

Some analysts believe that the main goal of late 2015 Moscow-*Taliban* negotiations was to painfully hit the United States once again, following Russia's operation in Syria. Moscow feels discontent that the United States has not reported on the fulfillment of the UN mandate of 2001 for a peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan, which clearly has gone far beyond the mandate.

Meanwhile, the *IS* threat near the borders of Central Asian republics has been growing so rapidly, that it required a prompt response. So, Russia's current contacts with the *Taliban*, allegedly mediated by Tajikistan, were triggered by both *IS* strengthening and the *Taliban*'s successes in the northern regions of Afghanistan. "We are ready to adopt a flexible approach to possible easing of the sanctions regime under UN SC Resolution 1988 on the *Taliban*, if this does not contradict Afghanistan's national interests," Zamir Kabulov said.

➤ *With its fast maneuver, the Kremlin outlined its intention to promote a pawn to a queen and its readiness to be an important piece on the Afghan chessboard. The status of the UN SC member enables Russia to take the lead in the Afghan issue at any moment. If desired, Russia can become a key player in Afghanistan; start building an anti-IS coalition; reinforce its influence in Central Asia, and set up a channel of communication with the Taliban, which will be needed should the situation at the border aggravate.*

It is reasonable to expect that, following Iran, Russia can request to join to the four-party initiative under the reconciliation program, in which the United State, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan are participating at the moment.

#### GIVE UP A SEAT

Although Afghan and Western officials always called Russia, India and China to take a more active participation in addressing the Afghan issues, in practice they were offered a place in the wake of US policy. The US General John Campbell who is the current commander of the US forces in IRA explains the dispositions in a straight soldier-like manner: "The presence is tantamount to influence. If you have people on the ground, you have influence." Investments in the US influence in the region are clearly contrary to Moscow's plans, just as to those of Beijing.

➤ *Uncontrolled instability in Afghanistan largely served Russia's interests: the unpredictable Afghanistan hindered ambitious projects that could draw the Central Asian republics away from Russia's sphere of influence (TAPI; CASA-1000; U.S. New Silk Road; China's Silk Road Economic Belt, with one of its corridors passing through Afghanistan). The threat of extremism from south consolidated the CSTO, while the United States and their allies were incurring expenses to neutralize the Taliban and form the country's security forces.*

Possibly, this model of Afghanistan's existence is coming to an end today. At the NATO summit in July 2016 in Warsaw, the coalition members will take a final decision on financial allocations to support the law enforcement authorities till 2020. Some countries announced in advance their intention to quit the ISAF mission. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reassured that no considerable changes in the overall size of troops (currently about 12,000 servicemen, including 7,000 US soldiers) were expected for 2016. However, further plans of the coalition in Afghanistan will be determined by a new president of the United States. Meanwhile, the NATO member states committed to allocate \$4.1 billion annually till the end of 2020.

➤ *The Kremlin will probably wait for the outcome of the NATO summit in Warsaw before making its next move. And after the summit, it would be reasonable to wait for the results of the US presidential elections.*

Generally, it seems obvious that the NATO mission is coming to an end and that players from the bench are needed on the field. Western delegations to Moscow became more frequent, attempting to engage Russia, first of all Russia's military, in Afghan affairs more deeply. The First Vice President of Afghanistan, General Abdul Rashid Dostum even visited Chechnya, asking Ramzan Kadyrov for military assistance.

The threat of Kabul government to be overthrown is a real driver for Russia-EU cooperation. Possibly, for Russia and the EU this threat may become as strong as growing migration and spread of drugs. If we use chess terminology, Russia is offered an opportunity to make one more tactically advantageous move, i.e. resume the Afghanistan-relation cooperation that was suspended 2-3 years ago, before the Ukrainian crisis.

The position of external players and their ability to come to an agreement will be extremely important. So far, the neighbors of Afghanistan have had different points of view on its future. For example, for India chaos is better than peace on the conditions of the enemy, as it makes the enemy spend resources to support its placemen and fight the opponents and competing clans. India's goal is to eliminate the Pakistani protégés from the Afghan peace process. But should these efforts fail (which is very likely to happen), India will be interested in chaos and in an internal armed conflict in Afghanistan more than in stability, as in this case stability will mean the strengthening of Pakistan.

➤ *Coming back to Russia's official position: the other day the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has announced that Moscow will not join the US peace settlement initiative in Afghanistan, as it is unwilling to be a "background actor" and can itself drive the process of negotiations, taking into account the interests of all regional states.*

However, if Russia is unwilling to play by someone else's rules, is it ready to outline its own? No concrete proposals have been voiced yet, but the confident tone of Russian officials and obvious concern of Western diplomats suggest that the Kremlin's contacts with the Taliban turned out to be surprisingly fruitful. So far, Zamir Kabulov has been modest when speaking about successes: "When both the Talibs and the Afghan government ask us, then there will be sense in our involvement." Moscow is taking a pause, and the pause, probably, won't be long. For the unstable Afghanistan with its Islamist ideas and money generated by drug trafficking can turn into a hotbed of terrorism the world has never seen before.



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Moscow – Geneva, January 2016

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[...]

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*Dear members of the Trialogue Club International,*

The 2016 Club season has been opened, and we are glad to **invite you to prolong your membership for 2016 or 2016-2017**, if you have not done so yet.

In 2016, the *Triologue Club* members will continue to receive our exclusive information on the foreign policy priorities of the Russian Federation, and on current threats and challenges to global security. **Five meetings of the Trialogue Club International** are planned for 2016 (four in Moscow and one abroad); Club members will receive 4 issues of the Security Index quarterly journal in electronic form and 2 issues in print (in 2016 only in Russian), **12 issues of the Russia Confidential exclusive analytics bulletin**, our informational and analytical newsletters.

As before, experts of the *Triologue Club International* and of its partner organization PIR Center are open to an exchange of views on key international problems.

Fees for the *Triologue Club* membership since 2016 are as follows:

Period	Individual membership	Corporate membership
01.01.16. – 31.12.16. (1 year)	50 000 rub.	80 000 rub.
01.01.16. – 31.12.17. (2 years)	90 000 rub.	140 000 rub.

We would like to remind you that the corporate membership is based on “**1+1**” **scheme** when **two representatives** of the organization participate in the work of the Club.

On all questions concerning the *Triologue Club International* membership, please contact us by the e-mail [secretary@trialogue-club.ru](mailto:secretary@trialogue-club.ru) or by phone: +7 (985) 764-98-96

Sincerely,

**Chairman,  
Triologue Club  
International**

**Dmitry Polikanov**