Military-technical Cooperation between Russia and Afghanistan: History and Future Prospects

For several decades now, a civil war has been raging in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which is rife with terrorism. This breeding ground of instability threatens Central Asia, South Asia, and indirectly all the Eurasian nations. Russia is among nations that have demonstrated a great deal of commitment to bringing peace and rule of law back to Afghanistan. One of Russian Federation’s promising policy directions, aimed at resolving the Afghan crisis, is improving the Afghan National Army’s defense capabilities via military-technical cooperation.

Afghanistan is situated in a strategically important location, in the very heart of Eurasia. Land routes connecting southern, eastern and western parts of Eurasia crisscross the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. In times of peace, this made Afghanistan an important transit route for international trade. However, in the last few decades, the war and terrorism, tearing this nation apart, have transformed Afghanistan into an obstacle to regional trade and economic integration of Eurasia, as well as a breeding ground for international terrorism threatening neighboring and other countries. The countries of Central Asia are at substantial risk and include former Soviet Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as their standards of living and pervasive radical sentiment could become fertile ground for terrorism. And in turn, instability in Central Asia may threaten Russia’s southern borders.

Hence, Russia tries to play an active role in resolving the Afghan crisis and support the nation’s legitimate
government by, for instance, supplying it with weapons. Russia delivered military equipment to the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (or the Afghan Northern Alliance), which was established in 1996 after the Taliban (a terrorist organization banned in Russia) captured Kabul. The Afghan Northern Alliance, which controlled ten Afghan provinces that the Taliban was unable to seize, was recognized as a legitimate force by Western nations, as well as Russia. Initially, the Northern Alliance was equipped with a substantial number of Soviet tanks and airplanes. Naturally, it therefore needed help with replenishing its stockpile and repairing its equipment from the Russian Federation. With time, the Northern Alliance had seized 25% of Afghan territory from the Taliban with the aid from Russia and other nations. In autumn 2001, when the international campaign against terrorism began in Afghanistan, the Afghan Northern Alliance, equipped with Russian military equipment, allied with NATO forces to help defeat the Taliban. After freeing most of the nation from Taliban’s grip, the leaders of the Northern Alliance became part of the new legitimate government of Afghanistan, at which point the organization ceased to exist.

Russia’s support of the Northern Alliance in the early 2000s resulted in decreased terrorist activity and less drug trafficking in Central Asia. However, at the time Russia was unable to secure a position in the Afghan market or to arrange regular supplies of its weapons to the nation. The USA took control over this Afghan sector and forced the new government to buy American weapons. This displeased the Afghan leadership for a number of reasons. First of all, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan did not wish to depend on solely one supplier. And secondly, Afghan military servicemen had already become accustomed to using Russian military equipment, as the Afghan forces had plenty of it in stock, and since the equipment required maintenance from specialists from Russia or those who trained there. But, at the time, the US influence in Afghanistan was so great that the idea of broad military-technical cooperation between Russia and Afghanistan was put on the backburner.

Nevertheless, within a number of years, the situation began to change in Afghanistan. It turned out that it was impossible to completely re-establish the rule of law in this nation. The Taliban and other lawless organizations continued to destabilize the situation in the country, and the military campaign, which the US and its allies had expected to finish quickly with minimal losses, drew out for decades. It became clear that the United States would not be able to re-establish order in Afghanistan and fully equip the Afghan armed forces single-handedly. The US stopped impeding Afghan military cooperation with other countries as much as it did before. As a result, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan began to increase its trade in weapons with the Russian Federation. Hence, from 2010 to 2017 Russia sold more than 80 military helicopters Mil Mi-17 to Afghanistan.

The 5th Moscow Conference on International Security took place in April 2016. The Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, Sergey Shoigu, met with the Afghan Defense Minister, Mohammed Masoom Stanekzai, during the conference. Topics of discussion included joint efforts to combat terrorism and drug trafficking, as well as to establish military cooperation between Russia and Afghanistan. The two sides then reached an agreement to establish a commission on military cooperation. In addition, a decision to increase the quota of Afghans studying in Russian military academies was made. In September 2016, Afghan armed forces began their collaboration with the Russian company Rosoboronexport on repairing Afghan helicopters.

Afghanistan’s accession into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) may offer additional opportunities for strengthening military cooperation between the Russian Federation and Afghanistan. For now, Russia and China play leading roles in SCO, while the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan remains an observer state. Although the accession is far from imminent, the Afghan government is diligently working with the SCO leadership on this process.

In autumn 2017, the Afghanistan–Russia military cooperation encountered another obstacle, the United States, in its path. At that time, Americans announced their intention to earmark $7 billion in order to replace Russian helicopters Mil Mi-17, which equip the Afghan armed forces, with the US UH-60s. This could deal a major blow to the Russia-Afghanistan military cooperation. However, as of recent more and more experts are beginning to doubt that this plan can be realized. And in fact, those in doubt include Americans themselves. In June 2018, a report was published by Glenn Fine, the Pentagon’s inspector general, stating that UH-60s are inferior to Mil Mi-17 helicopters in a number of ways, hence replacing Russian helicopters with American ones would substantially decrease the Afghan armed forces’ military capabilities. Experts affirm that in conditions prevailing in Afghanistan, Mil Mi-17 helicopters have a greater load capacity and range, and can reach greater heights while carrying powerful weaponry. The difference between these two helicopter models can be explained by the fact that, in mountainous conditions (the typical Afghan landscape), the air is thinner which affects the output of a helicopter’s turbine engine. Soviet military personnel encountered this issue during the Afghan War, which raged from 1979 to 1989, and, as a result, Russian helicopters were modified to improve their performance in mountainous conditions. US helicopters, on the other hand, are not adopted for use in the mountains, and modifying them would require billions of dollars and take
Hence, the US has once again come to the realization that even in such a seemingly narrow sector, as arming the Afghan military, it is very difficult to operate alone. The 2001-2018 war has already made a dent in the US budget of over $117 billion (not to mention the thousands of lost lives of American soldiers). And US attempts to prevent Russian and Chinese military equipment manufacturers from entering the Afghan market, in order to remain its dominant player, are only leading to more losses by the US. This trend is true not only of the military equipment sphere. Fortunately, even if the United States loses control over the situation in Afghanistan, large Eurasian nations have long stood in readiness to take on the responsibility for the future of Afghanistan themselves.

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