



Russia's Coming War in Afghanistan

Briefing Paper
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ABOUT **COMMANDELEVEN**

CommandEleven is a research organization focused on Pakistan's national security aspects and enhancing global understanding and collaboration opportunities for the nation.

Founded in 2015, **CommandEleven** provides situational awareness to facilitate a better understanding of the key dynamics that effect Pakistan from a national security perspective, especially in relation to terrorism, insurgencies and extremism.

CommandEleven seeks to inform and guide public policy and decision makers in government, business and military through a rigorous program of publications, conferences, digital medias, policy briefings and recommendations.

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. has clearly and squarely lost the war in Afghanistan after 16 years, thousands of casualties, hundreds of billions of dollars spent on a directionless, endless conflict. So, what about the vacuum of power to exist in Afghanistan when the U.S. finally withdraws its forces completely from Afghanistan; well there are numerous possibilities but one of them more possible than the others; the Russian intervention in Afghanistan. So, what factors are driving Russia's coming war in Afghanistan; its security and geopolitics. This article will look into both.

SECURITY

If Russia was really a bear, the Central Asian region would literally be its underbelly mainly for its strategically important location and more recently the rise of the vicious terrorist group IS in Afghanistan under the banner of 'Khorasan Province'. The IS-K in Eastern Afghanistan is mainly made up of splinter groups of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan which sought shelter in Afghanistan after they were defeated by the Pakistani Military from the FATA region, this particular faction of the IS-K was hit by the [U.S. MOAB](#) strike in the Nangarhar province and has recently been involved in intense fighting for the control of Tora Bora complex and has faced numerous drone strikes as well; however there is a little known branch of IS-K which is active in the Northern Afghanistan which experts say is gearing up to wage a campaign of terrorist attacks in Russia and is [being enabled](#) by the United States and its surrogates in Kabul. This claim; none other than the Russian government has been reinforced by intelligence reports confirming that this rather less known branch of IS-K has not been targeted by the United States & Afghan forces. This revelation has obviously rung alarm bells in Moscow and they are [reinforcing their Military base in Tajikistan](#); a country that borders Afghanistan for cutting down reaction time in an event of a massive attack in Russia by IS-K which warrants a Military response. Judging by the recent attacks in [St Petersburg](#), the Russian security concerns in Afghanistan aren't over-blown or unjustified and these concerns have already resulted in the Russian state seeking close communication with the Afghan Taliban; the enemy of my enemy is my friend indeed, or at least that is what the Americans are telling everyone these days. In my assessment; the Russian state has already placed deterrence in place and it would not hesitate to swing into action in Afghanistan should the IS-K succeed in conducting a spectacular terrorist event in Russia.

GEOPOLITICS

Russia wasn't very popular in Central Asia during much of the last Century and it was one of those quiet spectators on the global geopolitical chessboard which adopted a 'wait and see' approach after the Americans went on to invade Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. During much of the past decade and half as the war in Afghanistan raged on, Russia didn't actively participate in any geopolitical project dealing with the Afghanistan question. That however has changed very quickly as Moscow has realized that it has an opportunity to cultivate its influence in Afghanistan as the Americans pack up and go home. Moscow has opened up various channels of communication with the Afghan stakeholders while keeping the [Americans at an arm's length](#); clearly indicating that Moscow thinks of the U.S.

as a part of the problem, rather than a solution and Americans are [not happy](#) about the increasing Russian footprint in Afghanistan, leading to some in Washington DC having gone as far as accusing the Russians of arming the Afghan Taliban; an accusation normally reserved for bullying Pakistan.

This brings us to the second most important facet of the Russian strategy in Afghanistan; its open embrace of Pakistan. Russia not only has very quickly mended fences with Pakistan by accepting the South Asian Kingmaker into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; but also by supporting the vital, China – Pakistan Economic Corridor project and investing more than \$2 billion into an LNG pipeline project in the country. The Russian change of heart over its Cold-War enemy Pakistan is a classic turn of fortunes in the geopolitical world; as it is rooted in the symmetry of interests both countries have in Afghanistan ranging from security to transit trade and the big question of the future of Afghanistan. Under these dynamics, the Russian state is communicating with the Afghan Taliban as a genuine political party to the conflict and their increasing engagement coupled with the aforementioned security situation regarding IS-K can eventually lead to a Russian intervention in Afghanistan with the help of Afghan Taliban to fight those groups of IS-K which the U.S. or Afghanistan aren't willing to fight.

CASUS BELLI

Afghanistan watchers in Pakistan; me included have long feared a so called 'Black Swan Event' taking place in Russia which would eventually be linked to IS-K in Afghanistan, consequently drawing the Russians into Afghanistan once more. This event could manifest as a massive and spectacular terrorist state which compels the Russian state to take direct military action using its base in Tajikistan with an objective to cripple IS-K and its capacity to mount further attacks in Russia. If this terrorist event takes place in the future, the Russians have a willing and capable ally; the Afghan Taliban to fight on the ground while the Russians provide them with close air support. The Afghan Taliban are locked in a two-front war against the Kabul National Unity government forces and IS-K which is often accused of being enabled by Kabul and the United States to keep multiple fronts open for the Taliban. In the event of such an attack taking place in Russia, both security and geopolitical dynamics will push Russia into the Afghanistan theater and if it does choose to ally with the Taliban, it would also have to support them to fight their primary adversary; the pro American government in Kabul. I do not believe that such an intervention would include large amounts of Russian soldiers fighting on the ground. In my assessment, it would be limited to the use of Russian Special Forces, intelligence assets and airpower to drive the IS-K into oblivion.

FORECAST

Considering Russia's security, geopolitical and economic interest coupled with a renewed push in Moscow to assert the country as a super-power; I believe that Russia would intervene in Afghanistan at some point in the future, but even with all the muscle it will need regional players like Pakistan, China and Iran on its side who share similar interests in Afghanistan as Russia and might be willing to collaborate under a long term strategic model to not only defeat IS-K in Afghanistan but also to see the Americans exit from Central Asia completely so the regional geopolitical blueprint followed by the Shanghai

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Cooperation Organization can be realized. In this end, this war is about the future of the Asian Century and it's a war Russia is finding itself increasingly embroiled in; the only question is when.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shahid Raza serves as the Director - Geopolitics at CommandEleven. He brings to the team a set of sophisticated analysis and forecasting capabilities of geopolitical dynamics and trends from around the world. His area of expertise is the analysis of hybrid warfare strategies involving Pakistan, India, China, Russia, Central and South Asia, North America and the Middle East. He brings to our team his strong grip on military grade conventional and nuclear weapon systems, their employment doctrines in both conventional and asymmetrical warfare operations and their impacts on the strategic stability & balance of power of a given region and the World. As our Director General of Operations, he brings a unique blend of applied, analytical and research team management capabilities to the organization which prove critical for delivering the most cutting-edge situational awareness, analysis and policy recommendations for our most valued customers.

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