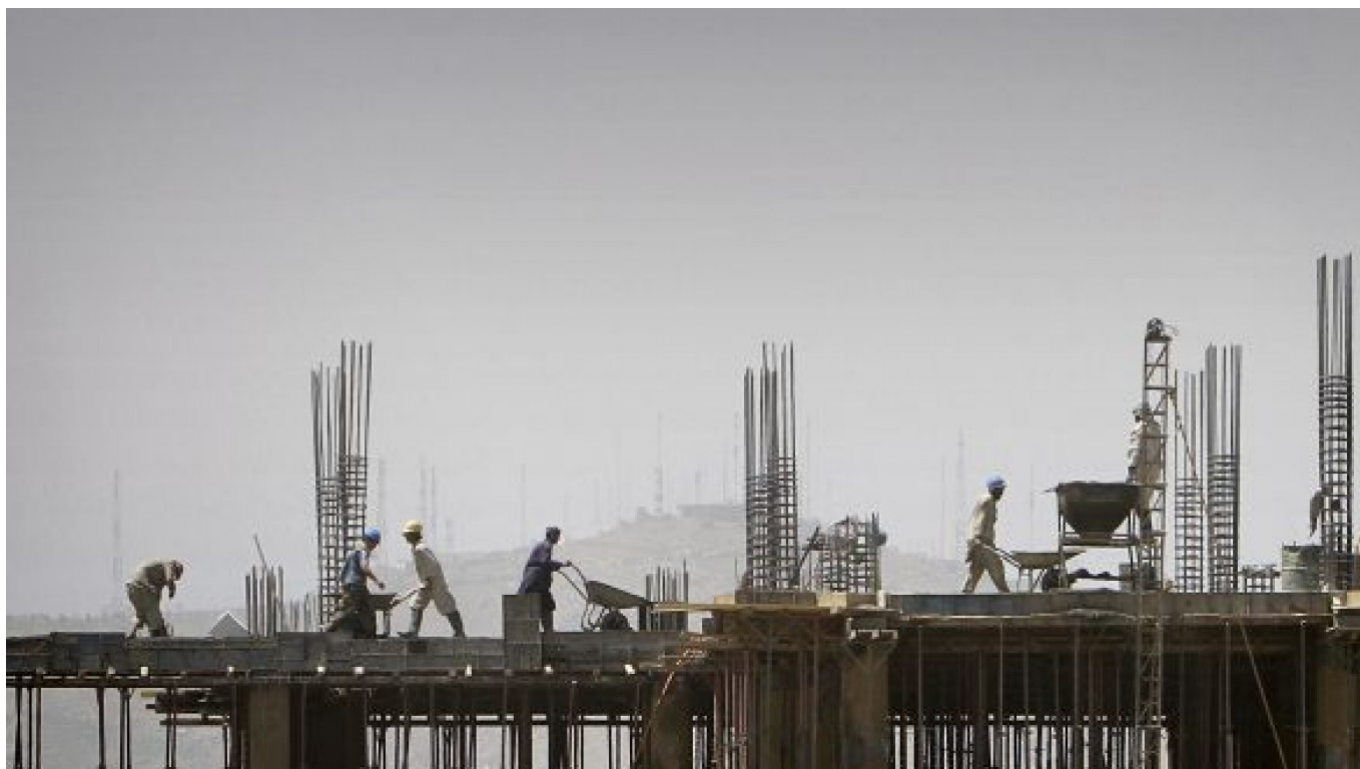


Russian Envoy Sees Role Rebuilding Afghanistan

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Afghans constructing a building in Kabul last week. Russia has embarked on a series of projects in Afghanistan. **Musadeq Sadeq**

KABUL, Afghanistan — Russia wants to enlarge its presence in Afghanistan and rebuild the country where Soviet troops fought a disastrous decade-long war, Russia's envoy to Kabul said, describing ties between the two former foes as the best in 20 years.

Although Russia has refused to send troops to join the NATO-led war in Afghanistan, Moscow has been flexing its muscles in the region bordering much of Central Asia, which Russia views as its traditional sphere of influence.

"Relations, I think, are at their highest in the past 20 years, and they are moving and expanding. ... But I would like them even wider," Russian Ambassador Andrei Avetisyan said in an interview in Russia's vast, opulent Kabul embassy late last week.

Russia has embarked on a series of infrastructure and hydroelectric projects in Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union lost 15,000 troops fighting mujahedin insurgents before trudging

away from the country in 1989.

Strengthening this relationship, Afghan Finance Minister Omar Zakhilwal just wrapped up a 12-day trip to Russia, where he held meetings with President Dmitry Medvedev and other high-ranking officials.

His trip follows Russia's scrapping a year ago of almost \$12 billion of debt owed by Afghanistan to Russia.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, in the Kazakh capital, Astana, last week praised a June 14 agreement between Moscow and Kabul to boost trade and economic ties. Karzai spoke to Medvedev at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit last week.

"A country with a functioning economy, with people having jobs, is less dangerous," said Avetisyan, who worked in the Soviet Embassy in Kabul in the 1980s, becoming fluent in Afghanistan's two main languages, Dari and Pashto.

Avetisyan said Russia's quest for stability in Afghanistan stems from its fear of what he described as Afghanistan's two main threats: terrorism and drugs.

Escalating violence across Afghanistan in the 10th year of an increasingly unpopular war has sent tremors of worry across Russia, which borders mainly Muslim former Soviet republics in Central Asia and which is battling a growing Islamist insurgency in its own volatile North Caucasus.

Health officials warn that Russia's position as the world's top user of heroin, which is smuggled from Afghanistan through Central Asia's porous borders, is spurring an HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Avetisyan said Russia hopes this year to embark on constructing affordable housing, reminiscent of the Soviet occupation when Moscow built infrastructure across the country.

Each year, Russia hopes to build about 1 million square meters of housing, starting with Kabul and with an eye to expanding to other cities.

Russia also wants to be involved in hydroelectric dam projects and a proposed gas pipeline stretching from Turkmenistan to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Though Afghanistan was devastated by the Soviet Union's war here, which by some estimates killed millions and destroyed its once-thriving agriculture, both sides are looking through "rose-tinted glasses," Avetisyan said.

"The recollection [of the Soviet era] is better than I expected when I came here. The feeling among the Afghans from people on the street to the ministers is very friendly. And it is mutual," he said.

He said Russia is "not to ever be involved in any military activities here. ... We are ready to come and help" on the development side.

Under a gradual transition process beginning next month, U.S. and NATO troops plan to hand

over security for all of Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Avetisyan, however, criticized that date as premature.

"In the three years that are left before 2014, I have doubt that it is indeed possible to build a strong army and police," he said, adding that such training requires at least five years.

NATO is racing against the clock to train Afghanistan's ill-equipped and illiterate army and police. Critics have warned that progress is slow and that security gains cannot be upheld.

"We support the transition as we want everything in Afghanistan to be Afghan-led. ... But the situation in the country today makes us worried about the preparedness," he said.

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