

Alone Against the Taliban

By [Alexander Golts](#)

May 13, 2013



Better late than never, as they say. On May 8, President Vladimir Putin convened the Security Council to discuss the largest threats facing the country. Amazingly, not a word was spoken about the usual bogeymen such as the U.S. missile defense installations in Europe. This time, the officials discussed very real threats. Putin declared that the situation in Afghanistan had a direct bearing on Russia's national security. "We must ensure the stability of Russia's southern borders in general," he said, "and the Eurasian region in particular."

Putin is absolutely right. Once the coalition forces withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014, the Taliban will undoubtedly attempt to assert control over the Central Asian republics. Considering the horrendous poverty in which most of the people of those countries live, Islam extremism could very possibly attract tens of thousands of supporters, which, in turn, could lead to turmoil and even civil war in these countries.

Moscow prefers to blame everything on the NATO-led coalition forces fighting in Afghanistan, and particularly on the U.S. Putin told the Security Council last week: "The foreign military contingent, with U.S. troops at their core, has not yet managed to achieve a turnaround in the fight against terrorist and radical groups. On the contrary, these groups

have become increasingly active of late." At the same time, Putin expressed no gratitude to the Western troops that have worked and fought for 12 years to bring stability to the region, and with it, security to Russia's porous southern borders. Just months before the terrorist attack on 9/11, Russia had serious plans to deploy 60,000 troops near the border with Kazakhstan to counter the possible threat from the Taliban. That need disappeared when the U.S. and its allies launched military operations in Afghanistan in October 2001. Meanwhile, Moscow has done little to boost its own security in the region after 2014 and shouldn't blame the U.S. and its allies for its own failure to use the past 12 years to prepare for this day.

The Kremlin is placing its bets on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization as a means to counter the Taliban. The main goal is to form a Collective Rapid Reaction Force that would give Moscow the legal grounds to interfere in local conflicts in Central Asian countries. But Russia is encountering problems with Uzbekistan, which has suspended its participation in the CSTO. As for Tajikistan, Putin has signed an agreement that would allow Russia to rent military bases in that country for 49 years, although the Tajik authorities have yet to ratify it. By some accounts, the Tajik authorities want to force Russia to pay the same rent that it does for military bases in Kyrgyzstan, while another theory holds that Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon has demanded guarantees from Moscow that he remain in power.

It is no secret that Central Asian leaders are jealously watching each other to see how much each can win from Moscow in the form of payments, credits, and other assistance. In any case, the authoritarian leaders of these countries find themselves in a very difficult position. Their power and authority are threatened by pressure from the Taliban, while collective rapid-response forces could also threaten their hold on power. That is why Uzbek leader Islam Karimov opposed the creation of these forces and withdrew his country's membership from the CSTO. He doesn't want any foreign troops from Russia or other CSTO countries entering Uzbekistan under any pretext, and Tajik President Rakhmon probably shares his concerns.

Meanwhile, Central Asian leaders have additional opportunity to up the ante with Moscow now that Washington has announced its intention to leave a small contingent of troops and advisers in Afghanistan, but also significant stores of weapons in Central Asian countries. The argument is that it is too costly and time-consuming for the U.S. to haul huge amounts of military equipment home, particularly when hostilities will almost certainly erupt again in the region after 2014. Although some of the weapons will simply be warehoused in Central Asian states, the project will require a U.S. military presence in the region. At least a small contingent of U.S. instructors will have to train locals on the use of the weapons or ensure that the equipment is stored in battle-ready condition. The leaders of those Central Asian states can probably count on Washington paying handsomely for allowing even a modest U.S. presence to remain in their countries for an extended period.

Russia finds this scenario disturbing and claims that U.S. "bases" in Afghanistan and neighboring countries would be used to invade Iran and to push Russia out of Central Asia. "If the price for security in Central Asia is a continued U.S. presence there," one senior Russian diplomat recently said, "that price is unacceptable for us."

Moscow is behaving irrationally on this question, trying to humiliate the U.S. by attempting to demonstrate in the U.N. Security Council that Washington failed to fulfill its obligations under the U.N. mandate to extinguish the global terrorist threat in Afghanistan. Moscow's anti-U.S. tactic has no practical value aside from assuaging Putin's imperial ambitions. Meanwhile, Russian diplomacy is losing a chance to work with the U.S. in finding a common approach to ensuring security and stability in Central Asia and Afghanistan. This is all the more important considering that China has shown no desire to take on any of this responsibility. That means that once the Taliban gain control in Afghanistan, Russia could be left to face them alone.

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