

Poker-Faced, Russia Flaunts Its Afghan Card

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY, *New York Times*, February 22, 2009

MOSCOW — Russia last week marked the 20th anniversary of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan with avowals from its leaders that they really, truly do not want the American military mission there to suffer the same humiliating fate.

In practice, though, it often seems that Russia cannot decide whether it hopes that America's current venture in Afghanistan succeeds, collapses or just ends up in a lengthy slog that might be cause for furtive grins in the backrooms of the Kremlin.

These contradictory impulses were underscored this month when the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan announced that a crucial American military base that supplies forces in nearby Afghanistan would be closed — apparently at Moscow's urging. At the same time, the Russians said they would let nonlethal cargo for the American-led NATO mission be transported across Russia.

Russia's ambivalence stems in large part from its renewed effort to assert a zone of influence, flexing its power across the former Soviet Union and deepening tensions with the United States on a range of issues. Its unease over supposed Western encroachment spurred its August war with neighboring Georgia, which wants NATO membership; now it is coming to bear on Afghanistan.

The Kremlin under Vladimir V. Putin is essentially making clear that because the United States is maneuvering in Russia's neighborhood, the Kremlin must exert some control — even if it means hampering the ability to supply the Afghanistan mission.

"Russia wants to be the only master of the Central Asian domain," said Andrei Serenko, a founder of the Center for the Study of Contemporary Afghanistan, a Russian research group. "Russia is interested, to the maximum extent possible, in making things difficult for the U.S. — in making the transfer of American forces into Afghanistan be dependent on the will of the Kremlin."

On its face, Russia has a lot to lose in Afghanistan. It fears the spread of Islamic extremism from Afghanistan into Central

Asia and on to southern Russia, where for years it has battled an Islamic insurgency in Chechnya and nearby regions.

Confronting a serious heroin problem, Russia also urgently needs Afghanistan's authorities to curtail poppy production. And of course, given the history, Russia might be expected to empathize with NATO over the mission's difficulties.

Beyond its concerns about American soldiers nearby, the Kremlin also seems reluctant to offer significant help until it knows the Obama administration's stance toward Russia. Relations soured under George W. Bush after he called for Ukraine and Georgia to enter NATO, and proposed an anti-missile system for Eastern Europe. Mr. Obama has not yet said whether he will pursue those policies.

"This is a very delicate moment for Russia, because it is trying to understand the plans of the Obama administration," said Vladimir Sotnikov, a South Asia expert at the Institute for Oriental Studies in Moscow. "In the Russian political elite, there is a struggle between pragmatists and conservatives. Pragmatists are standing for a new chapter in Russian-American relations, but conservatives are thinking in older terms — 'Look, no major changes are going to take place, so let's close down the American base.'"

The Russian position on Afghanistan would appear to loom increasingly large as President Obama presses his plan to quell the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan and seek out leaders of Al Qaeda along the largely ungoverned Pakistani border. Last week, he announced that he would send an additional 17,000 American troops to Afghanistan. Meanwhile, access to supply those troops through Pakistan has become more tenuous.

So, even as administration officials have called for a new era of relations with Russia — what Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. described recently as pressing "the reset button" — they have also begun expressing irritation over Afghanistan.

"The Russians are trying to have it both

ways with respect to Afghanistan, in terms of Manas,” Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said last week, referring to the base in Kyrgyzstan. “And the question is, on one hand, you’re making positive noises about working with us in Afghanistan, and on the other hand you’re working against us in terms of that airfield, which is clearly important to us. So how do we go forward in that light?”

Mr. Gates said he hoped that the United States might be able to reach a new agreement with Kyrgyzstan to keep the base open. His statement suggested that the administration knows that to improve the situation in Central Asia, it most likely has to go through Moscow .

Igor V. Barinov, a Parliament member from Mr. Putin’s party who is a prominent voice on defense matters, said the Kremlin realized that it shares many goals with Washington in Afghanistan. He said he would favor eventually even allowing military hardware to be transported across Russia to Afghanistan. (Like other senior Russian officials, he said there was no chance of the Kremlin sending troops to Afghanistan, for obvious reasons.)

But Mr. Barinov said that at least for

now, the Russian leadership is having a hard time brushing aside its longstanding grievances.

“A lot of these things,” he said, “are the consequences of the attitude that NATO takes and has taken in recent years toward mutually important issues that touch upon the interests of Russia — beginning with the Balkans and Yugoslavia, Kosovo, NATO moving eastward, to Ukraine and Georgia, the Baltic states. And if more attention had been paid toward Russia’s opinion, then the situation would now be much better.”

Dmitri O. Rogozin, Russia’s outspoken ambassador to NATO, has often pointed out that the Kremlin considers stabilizing Afghanistan so vital that even during the strains with the West over the Georgia conflict, it did not rip up its agreement to allow nonmilitary cargo to travel across Russia.

Mr. Rogozin reiterated this month that Russia was deeply worried about the spread of Islamic extremism. But he also did not shy from expressing a little satisfaction that the mighty Americans were faring not much better than the Soviets.

“They have repeated all our mistakes, and they have made a mountain of their own,” he said.