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Russia Seeks Bigger Role in Afghanistan on Eve of BRIC Summit

By Lyubov Pronina

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President Dmitry Medvedev will seek to increase Russia's role in resolving the conflict in Afghanistan at a regional security summit that may also include talks with reelected Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Russia's contribution may include "giving Afghanistan practical assistance in restoring its economy and expanding the practice of regular political consultations," Sergei Prikhodko, an aide to Medvedev, told reporters in Moscow yesterday.

Medvedev will meet with his Afghan and Pakistani counterparts, Hamid Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari, during a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a six-country security alliance that includes China and four former Central Asian Soviet republics. The two-day forum, which starts today in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg, will be followed late tomorrow by the first summit of the so-called BRIC countries.

Medvedev has repeatedly said Russia is prepared to cooperate with the U.S. to bring order to Afghanistan, where the Soviet army fought a nine-year Afghan war that ended in 1989. U.S. President Barack Obama is adding 17,000 combat personnel and 4,000 trainers to Afghanistan, a conflict he has called the "central front" of the campaign against terrorism.

Russia won't send troops to join the United Nations- mandated International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, led by the U.S. and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies, Prikhodko said, reiterating the Russian government's position.

Poppies, Cannabis

"It's quite possible that when the U.S. and NATO realize over the next two years that their efforts in Afghanistan have little chance of succeeding and start looking for a way out, the Shanghai organization will assume greater responsibility and its member countries will have to decide how to tackle these problems," said Fyodor Lukyanov, an analyst at the Council on

Foreign Defense Policy in Moscow.

Russia has called for NATO troops to stem the flood of drugs out of Afghanistan. On May 6, parliament approved a statement urging the United Nations Security Council to tie the presence of NATO forces in the country to the eradication of poppy and cannabis harvests.

Pakistan and India have observer status in the Shanghai organization. Zardari and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will “meet, shake hands” at the summit, their first direct contact since November terrorist attacks in Mumbai, “but more than that it is hard to predict,” India's Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon said yesterday.

Iran also has observer status, and Prikhodko said Ahmadinejad was expected to attend and hold talks with Medvedev. Mongolia, the fourth observer country, will be represented by First Deputy Prime Minister Norovyn Altankhuyag.

Trade Dispute

Russia's regional agenda was underscored by yesterday's summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, another security grouping that joins Russia with the former Soviet republics of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The latter four countries are also members of the Shanghai group with Russia and China. Belarus boycotted the June 14 meeting amid a trade dispute with Russia.

Since he became president last May, Medvedev, 43, has pushed for new global economic and security structures that would counter-balance the influence of the U.S. and NATO. He has cultivated relations with allies in Asia and stepped up efforts to turn BRIC from an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India and China, the world's biggest emerging markets, into a viable alliance.

'Alternative to NATO'

The Shanghai organization was created in 2001, during the first presidential term of Medvedev's predecessor, Vladimir Putin, who now serves as prime minister. Its member states have a population of about 1.5 billion people.

“Both Russia and China will be pushing the other countries in the region not to open too much to the West, essentially the U.S.,” said Chris Weafer, chief strategist with Moscow-based UralSib Financial Corp. “They will be looking to make sure this organization stays a kind of alternative to NATO and generally opposed to Western involvement in the region.”

Russia last week agreed to create a customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan. The three nations will drop their individual negotiations on accession to the World Trade Organization in favor of a collective bid.

“They will be looking to do something similar to that at a political level with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization -- to close ranks, as it were, rather than to open up,” Weafer said.

BRIC Summit

At the BRIC summit, the four leaders are unlikely to discuss Medvedev's proposal to create

regional reserve currencies and a supranational currency in a bid to diminish the power of the dollar, Prikhodko said. They will discuss the world economic crisis and next month's Group of Eight summit, he said, adding that they may issue recommendations for tackling the crisis, including reform of global financial institutions.

“No one should have inflated expectations of this summit,” Lukyanov said. “The countries are so different that it will be hard to produce results overnight.”

The BRIC delegations also plan to issue a statement on global food security and to discuss North Korea's nuclear test last month, Prikhodko said.

While BRIC has attracted a good deal of interest, especially since Brazil, China and Russia announced they would shift about \$70 billion of reserves into International Monetary Fund debt, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization seems more “mythical” to the rest of the world, said Alexander Rahr, a Russia expert at Berlin's German Council on Foreign Relations.

“Very few people take BRIC or the SCO seriously,” Rahr said. “One day the West will wake up and realize that it has slept through an historical development.”