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TIME

Russia Moves to Boost its Role in Central Asia

By Ishaan Tharoor
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On July 30, Russian president Dmitri Medvedev sat down for talks with the leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan, two countries that sit in the crosshairs of the U.S.-led war on terror. The meeting with Afghan president Hamid Karzai and his Pakistani counterpart, Asif Zardari, took place in Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan. Reportedly on the table were plans to beef up trade ties as well as improve cooperation in the fight against Islamist extremism - clear signs, experts say, that Moscow is bolstering its role in the "Af-Pak" theater, a region Russia had largely retreated from after the scarring decade-long Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The Russian-orchestrated meeting comes amid fears that ongoing battles with Taliban militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan are spilling over into Central Asia - particularly Tajikistan, which shares a porous 800-mile-long (1,300 km-long) border with Afghanistan. Over recent months, Tajik security forces have been involved in an extensive campaign to combat local militants and supposed drug gangs operating in its mountainous borderlands, but there are also rumors of the return of Tajik Taliban fighters who have traded one rugged frontier for another. As if on cue, while the premiers were in discussion, a car bomb blast rocked Dushanbe. No deaths were reported, but the bombing has been linked to suspected militant activity. (See pictures of Pakistan's vulnerable North-West passage.)

Few details of the leaders' conversation have been disclosed, though it's believed deals on energy and infrastructure development were authored. Earlier in the week, both Karzai and Zardari had met with Tajik president Emomali Rakhmon to work out a joint strategy on fighting terrorism. Whether this will bear much fruit remains to be seen. "The people of Afghanistan [and] the people of Pakistan are looking up to the leadership of the region to help

with problems," said Zardari, alluding to Moscow's significant presence in Central Asia.

Behind the handshakes and platitudes lies a deeper political calculus. Karzai and Zardari began their presidential terms with staunch support from Western capitals - now both have fallen out of favor, faulted for not doing enough to rein in extremists amid accusations of corruption and misrule. A warmer relationship with Russia could be the counterbalance to the West's increasingly frosty and frustrated attitude toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. (See pictures of world leaders.)

Moreover, as the U.S. deepens its ties with Pakistan's historical rival, India, foreign policy experts suggest Islamabad may be trying to expand its relationship with Moscow. Since the Soviet days, India has always been Russia's traditional South Asian ally. Now Pakistani defense officials have mooted possible deals for Russian military hardware, moving away from the tacit understandings of a Cold War past. "Russia is trying to find a foothold in the region," says Brahma Chellaney, a strategic affairs analyst at the New Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research. "There's no reason why it shouldn't start selling arms to Pakistan to gain some influence." (See pictures of Russia celebrating Victory Day.)

All the parties who met in Dushanbe must also deal with the social powder keg that is Central Asia. The recession has badly hit the region, with shrinking job markets in richer nations like Russia and Kazakhstan sending thousands of migrant workers home to poorer ones, such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. What promises to be a very bleak year for many Central Asian households has only amplified questions over the stability of the region as a whole.

Some analysts suggest social unrest may mix with the turmoil of Taliban insurgencies further south. In Tajikistan, the fragile status quo that has existed since a civil war between Russian-backed forces and an Islamist opposition ended in 1997 looks to be unraveling. Observers point to a possible influx in recent months of Tajik and Uzbek militants, returning to their homeland after fighting alongside Pakistani and Afghan Taliban. Since May, the Tajik government has locked down the country's Rasht Valley, ostensibly as part of an anti-drugs operation, but also, say experts, in a bid to crack down on local Islamist-leaning warlords. In some parts of Central Asia, the ruling autocratic regimes exercise only a frail reach beyond their capitals. "You get outside Dushanbe," says Eric McGlinchey, a Central Asia specialist at George Mason University in Virginia, "and anything goes."

Medvedev will chair another Central Asian security summit on Saturday in Kyrgyzstan, with delegations from seven other former Soviet republics. An increased American interest in the region - if only as a logistical hub for its war effort in Afghanistan - has driven Moscow to reassert itself in its backyard. After the U.S. secured its lease of an air base in Kyrgyzstan this month, Russia now intends to persuade the Kyrgyz government to allow the building of a second Russian base on its soil. Moscow sees its pervasive influence, both economic and

political, in the region as a stabilizing force.

Yet Moscow is also part of the problem, says McGlinchey of George Mason University. The legacy of Soviet rule - from gerrymandered borders and dislocated populations to regimes of censorship and corruption - shapes Central Asia's politics to this day, and lingers in the cozy dealings between Russia's rulers and those ensconced in power throughout the region. Moreover, human rights advocates claim that Central Asian governments often raise the specter of terrorism to mask the abuses of their rule and the legitimate protests of their citizens. (See pictures of the politics of water in Central Asia.)

On July 31, Medvedev attended the opening of a massive Russian-backed hydroelectric plant that will eventually power 12% of Tajikistan. Moscow has promised further aid to Dushanbe and its neighbors, a move that has been privately encouraged by Washington. But good governance is needed to ensure those contributions make a difference. When seeking progress in one of the world's most war-ravaged regions, the symbolism of joint statements can only go so far.