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Medvedev urges regional solution to Afghan issues

By *OLGA TUTUBALINA*,
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Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said Friday that the fate of Afghanistan and surrounding nations should be decided by regional powers, an apparent call for reduced U.S. engagement.

The remarks appear to mark a new effort by Moscow to make strategic and economic inroads in Afghanistan at the expense of the United States, whose relations with Afghan President Hamid Karzai have become strained.

"What is happening in Afghanistan in the security sphere ultimately lies on our shoulders, so we need to strengthen cooperation within regional organizations" Medvedev said.

In a sign of Russia's effort to exert influence in the region, Medvedev announced that a deal will be signed early next year with Afghanistan's northern neighbor, Tajikistan, to extend the presence of Russian troops in the country by 49 more years.

Medvedev and Karzai met at a four-nation summit in the capital of Tajikistan that also included Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, whose countries both share porous borders with Afghanistan.

Medvedev singled out the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, two Russia-dominated security blocs comprising mainly former Soviet Central Asian members, as being key to preserving stability.

The United States controls a strategically valuable military air transit base in Kyrgyzstan some 1,000 kilometers (650 miles) north of Kabul that is used to ferry troops in and out of the region. It also provides military assistance to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Central Asian nations along Afghanistan's northern border have grown increasingly nervous about the prospect of regional unrest following the planned pullout of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2014.

Meanwhile, Russia has frequently criticized what it perceives to be NATO's failure to quash Afghanistan's multibillion dollar heroin trade. Afghanistan produces 90 percent of the world's opium, the raw ingredient used to make heroin, much of which makes its way to the Russian market through Central Asia.

While the governments of Russia and Central Asian nations have spoken frequently about the need for a coordinated military approach to deal with these challenges, progress has been hampered by diverging views on the specific responsibilities of the fledging security alliances.

By securing a deal to maintain its military presence in Tajikistan for half a century, Russia ensures it will remain a stakeholder in Central Asian security for the foreseeable future. Under the existing arrangement, the base agreement was to expire in 2014.

The 201st Motorized Rifle Division deployed in Tajikistan numbers 7,500 servicemen and is the largest current deployment of Russian troops abroad. It is based in three garrisons — near Dushanbe and in the southern cities of Kulyab and Kurgan-Tube.

Russia's military presence proved instrumental in negotiating an end to the civil war that ravaged Tajikistan in the 1990s.

Moscow has been strongly pressuring Tajikistan to allow it to revive a 1990s-era arrangement whereby Russian border troops were posted on the Tajik-Afghan border. Rakhmon's government has resisted those overtures, however, amid concerns that it could undermine the country's sovereignty.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are looking to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, both mountainous countries with a largely untapped potential for hydropower production, as a major future source of electricity.

One project, known as CASA-1000, envisions the creation of a 750-kilometer electricity line to transmit surplus electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Medvedev said the Russian government was willing to invest hundreds of millions of dollars into the project, which is estimated will cost around \$500 million to complete.