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Russia's Afghan agenda

By Jonathan Steele

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Gorbachev has valuable advice for the US on the war in Afghanistan that Putin would rather he keep to himself

The surprise in this week's reports that Russia is planning to help Nato in Afghanistan by training Afghan helicopter pilots is that people are surprised. Memories are short, it seems, for the shift in Moscow's line came as early as July last year during Barack Obama's first summit in the Kremlin.

Designed to press the "reset" button after east-west tempers flared over the war in Georgia, the meeting ended with several agreements, the most dramatic of which was Russia's nod for the US to send military supplies across Russian territory to its forces in Afghanistan. Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin wanted to give Obama a reward for taking a calmer view of Russia than George Bush, in particular for accepting Georgia's share of blame in the South Ossetian crisis and for cancelling the most provocative aspects of Bush's missile defence scheme which Moscow viewed as a threat.

The transit deal did not mean that Russia was about to join the fight against the Taliban by sending its own forces into battle, and the new agreement will not change that. Officials insist that no Russian troops will enter Afghanistan and the pilot training will take place outside the country. The Afghan air force already uses some Russian aircraft and if new Russian helicopters appear in Afghanistan, they will be with Afghans at the controls.

Russia's post-Soviet leaders have long seen eye-to-eye with the west on Afghanistan. Indeed, they were firmly against the Taliban earlier than the west. They consider the Taliban and al-Qaida greater regional and global threats than Iran. The Shia Islamists of Qom and Tehran have never attempted to destabilise central Asia, Chechnya or Russia's other Muslim-majority republics, unlike the Sunni fundamentalists who trained in Afghanistan. As president in 2001, Putin was one of the first world leaders to condemn the 9/11 attacks and support the US war for regime change in Kabul and Kandahar.

Where there are differences between the Kremlin and the west on Afghanistan, they concern the future. While an increasing number of western analysts argue that the US should prepare to talk to the Taliban, this is not a view shared by Moscow or the dictatorships of central Asia. They believe any deal would amount to appeasement. They would far prefer to keep Hamid Karzai in power in Kabul along with the Uzbek and Tajik warlords who support him than see any coalition with the Taliban, let alone a complete Taliban takeover.

By contrast, just at this moment along comes Mikhail Gorbachev with a warning to Obama that victory in Afghanistan is impossible and he should withdraw. The former Soviet president has long been isolated from the new Kremlin rulers. Whether it is on economic and social justice, the role of international banks, the need for environmental restraint or the value of democracy, Gorbachev is closer to enlightened western thinking than he is to the new class running his country.

Though he has no power, his views deserve to be heeded, and especially on Afghanistan. Like Obama, he inherited a war of choice that his predecessors had rushed into without sufficient thought or planning. Negotiations will not be easy, he reminded Obama, and in the late 1980s they were undermined by the US and Pakistan who claimed they wanted a neutral and democratic Afghanistan even as they were training militants – "The same ones who today are terrorising Afghanistan and more and more of Pakistan," as Gorbachev put it.

In many ways, Gorbachev had it easier than Obama does. Key members of the Soviet high command had become disillusioned with the Afghan intervention by 1985 when Gorbachev first signalled he intended to withdraw. Though the remaining hawks persuaded the Soviet leader to let them have a surge of intensified military activity in 1986 (but no extra troops), they soon saw it was not going to make a strategic difference. The war could not be won by force and the Kremlin changed its goal from keeping Afghanistan "friendly" to merely "neutral".

Today's war is at roughly the point where Gorbachev was in late 1985 – except that the generals in the field are united in still hoping for military victory. Obama's top commander, David Petraeus, has not given up on his surge, and if he decides to overrule his top brass the US president is in a harder political position than Gorbachev was in the Soviet Union's undemocratic system. The international context is also worse, given that Pakistan and Iran take opposite sides today.

As for the "new" Russia's position on Afghanistan, the irony is that Moscow is less willing to see a US withdrawal than Obama appears to be. Medvedev and Putin will not send their own troops, but they firmly want the Americans to stay.