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Russia offers NATO more assistance in transit to and from Afghanistan

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On 14 March, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov confirmed his country's readiness to make Ulyanovsk airport available to NATO for the transit of so-called non-lethal loads (the definition of which is quite flexible, and is determined in practice by the parties). If this decision comes into force, it will make easier for NATO's member states, primarily the United States, to arrange transit to and from Afghanistan, given the fact that the supply route through Pakistan is closed. At the same time, the Russian minister criticised what he saw as the hasty plans for withdrawing NATO forces from Afghanistan.

Russia is providing the Alliance with rail transit of non-lethal materials to Afghanistan under an agreement reached at the NATO-Russia summit in Bucharest in 2008. It was extended to cover return transit from Afghanistan as a result of the NATO-Russia summit in Lisbon in 2010. In addition, the US, Germany, France, Spain, Italy and non-NATO member Sweden have signed bilateral agreements with Russia allowing the air transit of troops and equipment.

Commentary

- This instance of cooperation between Russia and NATO countries in the Afghan issue is such a specific case that we cannot on this basis prejudge the general nature and direction of relations with these countries, notably the United States. Moscow has not ceased to cooperate with the US in Afghanistan, even during periods of poor Russian-American relations, such as the war with Georgia. Moscow's readiness to become more involved in the northern supply route to Afghanistan demonstrated right after the presidential elections in Russia is not accidental. It is intended to show pragmatism and willingness to cooperate, and to thaw Vladimir Putin's negative image in the US.

- Russia is ambivalent about the US presence in Afghanistan. It boosts the American position in Central Asia, which Moscow interprets as a threat to its interests in the region. Russia does not want to allow the Western countries to increase their political and military presence in Central Asia when withdrawing from Afghanistan. By offering its cooperation, Moscow wants to reduce the relative importance of these countries to the US.

- Nevertheless, Russia is interested in maintaining the presence of Western forces in Afghanistan. This operation constitutes a major burden for the West, especially the US, as it involves considerable amounts of resources, thus weakening the Western countries in the strategic dimension. Moreover, the withdrawal of most US forces from Afghanistan threatens to destabilise the countries of Central Asia, and Russia will need to take more responsibility for providing security in the region. It should also be noted that the transit is operating on a commercial basis, and is a lucrative venture for Russian companies. Consequently, Moscow is in favour of continuing the mission's current format (focused on stabilisation, according to the UN mandate), but at the same time it is opposed to the US maintaining military bases in Afghanistan on the basis of a bilateral agreement with the latter.

- The decision to open up the airport to NATO has yet to be signed into law; it cannot be ruled out that the Russian side will drag the matter out, treating it as a bargaining chip on disputed issues in relations with the United States. Most important for Moscow is that its position on the missile shield be acknowledged, especially with regard to limiting the deployment of its components in Central Europe. However, concessions from the American side in this area do not seem likely.