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The Other Allies: Russia, India, and Afghanistan’s United Front

THOMAS WITHINGTON

Nothing is comparable in the world to the Kalashnikov submachine gun in reliability, according to all Afghans.” Thus Russian President Vladimir Putin on the popularity of Soviet and Russian weapons during his first visit to NATO’s head office in Brussels on November 3, 2001. Putin has every reason to be *au fait* with the weapon preferences of Afghan soldiers, particularly those belonging to the United Front (United Islamic Front for the Liberation of Afghanistan, or the “Northern Alliance,” as it has come to be known by the American media). His country has been supplying them with AK-47 Kalashnikov assault rifles, tanks, and other assorted military equipment since 1995.

The United Front is a disparate collection of armed factions drawn from an assortment of Afghan ethnoreligious and political backgrounds, but united in their mutual hatred of the mainly Pash-tun Taliban. The alliance is comprised of a core group of factions that includes the Jamaat-e-Islami, Jumbish-i-Milli, and Hizb-i-Whadat-Kahilli.

The United Front has been able to lean heavily on its two main sponsors—India and Russia—for supplies of military equipment, and for training, engineering, and maintenance expertise (with the most recent aid provided by the Russians but paid for by the United States). This helped the United Front hold its Panjshir Valley stronghold in the northeast of Afghanistan for the past five years, where it retreated after its eviction from Kabul by the Taliban in 1996. Indian and Russian support has almost certainly been instrumental in assisting the rapid United Front advance across Afghanistan.

INDIA AND THE TALIBAN-KASHMIR AXIS

India has several reasons for supporting the United Front. It has always been concerned about security in its northern and northwestern border areas. Historically, India has enjoyed warm relations with Afghanistan. Kabul was home to a significant population of Hindus and a smaller community of Sikhs. The country was also situated on the western trade routes from India and frequently hosted Indian traders, merchants, and travelers. New Delhi began to reengage Afghanistan in its foreign policy with the February 1989 Soviet withdrawal and the fall of Najibullah’s neocommunist regime in 1992—with whom India had enjoyed good relations.

Following Najibullah’s fall, India developed a good relationship with Burhanuddin Rabbani, who became president with the collapse of Najibullah’s regime. In fact, Rabbani’s government is still widely recognized as Afghanistan’s last legitimate government and continues to hold Afghanistan’s United Nations seat. The United Front is essentially the government’s army. Further, India would later become home to approximately 80,000 refugees who fled Afghanistan after the collapse of Rabbani’s regime in 1996 as the Taliban extended their reach across Afghanistan.

New Delhi was also greatly concerned that the Taliban’s brand of highly radicalized Islam would inflame delicate communal tensions at home. Relations between parts of India’s Muslim and Hindu communities have been somewhat strained following the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) victory as the dominant partner in a coalition government during India’s general election in 1998. India was further incensed by a Taliban edict issued in 2001 requiring the few Hindus remaining in Kabul to wear yellow identity badges. For New Delhi and many other governments, this

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policy was uncomfortably close to that of the forced wearing of yellow stars by Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. One of India's overriding concerns, however, has been the repercussions that the Taliban's appearance has had on the Kashmir imbroglio. Although the militant activity against Indian rule in Kashmir had always retained more of a moral dimension—that is, a struggle for self-determination—as opposed to being a religio-political campaign, this began to change as the Taliban consolidated their hold over Afghanistan.

Taliban-ruled Afghanistan began to accommodate many insurgent groups operating in Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. In addition to Osama bin Laden's infamous Al Qaeda network, the Mujahideen-e-Khalq of Iran, the Xinjiang Liberation Front of China, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the Hizbul Mujahideen operating in Jammu and Kashmir all took advantage of Taliban hospitality and the military training they could receive inside Afghanistan. According to Indian sources, since the summer of 1992 the infiltration of "Afghanis"—foreign nationals from countries including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia—peaked at around 2,000. In May 2000, the United Front's foreign minister, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, claimed that "5,000 Pakistanis were training in Taliban-run camps for guerrilla war and terrorism in Indian-held Kashmir." The United Front has insisted that it will close all training camps once it defeats the Taliban.

The hijacking by Kashmiri militants of an Air India jetliner in January 1999 gave New Delhi added impetus to oppose the Taliban regime. The aircraft was eventually forced to land in Kandahar; one passenger was killed and India had to surrender three Kashmiri militants—incarcerated in India—to gain the release of the plane's remaining 155 passengers. The hijackers were granted asylum inside Afghanistan. The affair caused India substantial embarrassment, increased India's already-intense dislike of the Taliban, and pushed New Delhi even further toward the United Front.

Since the September 11 attacks on Washington and New York, India has insisted that Kashmiri militant groups such as the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LT) are intrinsically linked to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. According to Indian journalist Raul Bedi, the United

States "has provided firm evidence of the existence of around 120 training camps run by the ISI across Pakistan and Afghanistan. Some groups like the LT are funded by bin Laden's Al Qaeda foundation."¹

Bedi also reported that Jaswant Singh, India's defense and foreign minister, has stated that radio messages from Afghanistan had been intercepted in which Mullah Muhammed Omar, the Taliban's spiritual leader, had ordered all LT members to return from Pakistan and Kashmir to defend Afghanistan against any ground invasion by the United States and Allied forces, following the commencement of military operations on October 7, 2001. It is unclear how many LT members obeyed the call.

India has also been concerned that the same militant groups seek to export the jihad they are waging inside Indian-occupied Kashmir to other parts of the country. Kashmiri militant groups such as Markhaz Dawa al-Irshad, Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, and al-Badr insist that the liberation of Kashmir is but one item on the agenda. The liberation of Hyderabad and Junagadh, both significant Indian Muslim cities, should then follow, along with the establishment of two independent Muslim states within India's territorial borders in the north and south.

Directly linked to India's concerns over the Taliban–Kashmir militant axis is, of course, Pakistan's previous support for the Taliban. India's archrival was instrumental in helping the movement rise to power in Afghanistan. For Pakistan, the Taliban would provide a government in Kabul sympathetic to Islamabad's concerns. This would provide Pakistan's military with its much-desired "strategic depth." For Islamabad, this strategic depth meant that Pakistan would have been able to call on the Taliban's military assistance in times of crisis or conflict with India. At the same time, the Taliban represented a useful avenue by which the ISI could outsource its arming and training of pro-Pakistan insurgents for infiltration into Indian-held Kashmir.

India's support of the United Front subscribes, at least in part, to the old Arab maxim of "my enemy's enemy is my friend." India's warm links with Rabani's government and the front's promise to close all Kashmiri militant training camps have provided India with ample motives for support. The United Front's anger at Pakistan's funding and support of the Taliban also provided a useful justification for India's assistance. India would like to see a government sympathetic to its concerns in Kabul. India's warm relations with Iran would then effectively leave Pakistan surrounded on all fronts by governments that are allies of India. In New Delhi's eyes,

¹The ISI—Inter Services Intelligence—is the powerful joint military intelligence wing in Pakistan that is widely believed to have been behind the establishment, training, financing, and arming of the Taliban.

its archrival would be encircled, and would therefore be given even less room for maneuver.

RUSSIA'S UNDERBELLY

India's support of the United Front chimes well with Russia's links with the organization. Like India, Moscow enjoyed warm relations with the pre-Taliban Rabbani government. It considered Rabbani's regime to be far more moderate and therefore much more pliant to Moscow's concerns. The spread of radical Islam from Afghanistan into the bordering Central Asian countries of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—often referred to as Russia's "soft underbelly"—is something Moscow fears, especially as its war against Islamist insurgents in Chechnya continues.

On May 26, 2001, during a visit to Washington D.C., Abdullah, the United Front foreign minister, insisted that Chechen militants were using Afghan soil for training and resupply; "hundreds of Chechen fighters and their families had been arriving" in Afghanistan, he said. In July, Abdullah disclosed that the Chechens had established an embassy in Kabul and a consulate in Kandahar in January 2001. The move by the Chechens was designed, according to Abdullah, "to organize support for [Chechen] rebels there."

Moscow is livid about the presence of guerrilla training camps in Afghanistan and, like India, hopes that the United Front will close these facilities if they destroy the Taliban. That hope may have been realized with the front's liberation of Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Kunduz, and Kabul, and the United States Air Force attacks on "terrorist training facilities." It is thought that many of these camps being used to train Chechen militants. These same camps may also have had links with Al Qaeda.

Success in the war in Afghanistan may also help quell Russian concerns about the Taliban gaining a foothold in Central Asia. The Central Asian states are home to many ethnic Russians and also contain significant Russian military facilities. Russia feared that any coups by Islamist elements within its southern neighbors might have installed regimes sympathetic to the Taliban on its southern border. The resulting exodus of ethnic Russians would have

²Tehran has many concerns regarding the Taliban, not least the significant Afghan refugee population of roughly 1 million people, which it hosts, and narcotics trafficking across the eastern Iranian-Afghan border.

meant an influx of 10 million refugees arriving on the doorstep of Mother Russia.

This possibility, along with the Chechen concerns, led Russia, like India, to hedge its bets and support the United Front. The organization's more moderate stance and its pledges to curb the training of terrorists made it an obvious candidate for Moscow's support.

FORTIFYING THE FRONT

India's and Russia's support for the United Front crystallized in 1995, when the Taliban emerged and began their rapid occupation of Afghanistan. Alarm bells rang in both Moscow and New Delhi when the Taliban captured the western city of Herat in September of that year. While Russia was already providing sporadic exports of military equipment to Rabbani's government, India suddenly entered the fray, sending nonmilitary supplies through Iran.²

The supply of military equipment by Russia and India continued throughout 1996. Early that year,

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Russia upgraded the United Front airbase at the organization's north-eastern Afghan capital of Taliqan—close to the Tajik-Afghan border. Russia's assistance enabled

the front to establish an air bridge between Taliqan and Kolub, a Russian airbase in southern Tajikistan that the front had been permitted to use for the resupply and basing of its air wing. Russia's improvement of airfields inside Afghanistan continued, and was given added impetus in 1996 after the fall of Kabul and the eviction of the Rabbani government from the capital.

India also assisted the United Front in the upkeep of its air wing. Approximately 30 Indian aircraft technicians reportedly maintained the front's small collection of Sukhoi and MiG fighter aircraft, which were similar to those operated by the Indian air force. India also provided the United Front with military advisers, who assisted the front in the use of high-altitude warfare techniques (specialized equipment worth between \$6 million and \$10 million was also supplied). The Indian army excels in this type of warfare, no doubt because of its combat experience in the elevated terrain of Kashmir.

In October 2000, the United Front commander, General Ahmed Shah Massoud, held meetings with Russia's defense minister, Igor Sergeev. Sergeev promised additional military aid to assist the United Front in recapturing its former capital of Taliqan

(which was finally accomplished in November 2001). Massoud's talks with Sergeyev continued into early 2001. This time the "Lion of Panjshir" met with his Russian counterpart in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. The talks were highly productive, yielding the United Front a batch of tanks and armored personnel carriers. These vehicles were of a Soviet vintage, although apparently preferable to newer Russian designs (since many United Front commanders are former mujahids [guerrillas] who fought the Soviet army during the occupation, they gained considerable experience in operating captured Soviet equipment). As the current Russian defense minister, Sergei Ivanov, recently noted: the "Northern Alliance likes Soviet-made arms very much, is surely proficient in their use, and openly declares that it doesn't need any other arms, even modern Russian ones."

Following Russia's example, India stepped up its assistance to the United Front in early 2001, although it continued to provide only nonlethal military assistance. Massoud had insisted that he required at least 20 transport helicopters to sustain his anti-Taliban operations and to supply alliance fronts across Afghanistan with troops and materiel. India responded by providing four such aircraft and also arranged the lease of five An-32 "Cline" freighters. New Delhi also dispatched engineers to south Badakhshan to help refurbish an airfield and is said to have supplied cash to the United Front through its embassy in Tehran, although exact figures are difficult to obtain.

The terror attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent Allied military campaign led Russia to enhance its support of the United Front (the United States also began to provide aid to the United Front, giving it cash to purchase arms from Russia). On October 3, President Putin announced the increase in Russian support for the front, which he consistently referred to as the "lawful Afghan government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani." On October 27, Moscow promised to supply the rebel forces with 40 T-55 tanks and approximately 100 armored personnel carriers, reconnaissance vehicles, and infantry fighting vehicles. The deliveries would begin immediately and continue throughout the year. Moscow's promises followed meetings between General Muhammed Fahim—the new United Front commander and Rabbani's new defense minister—and General Anatoly Kvashin, Russia's chief of staff, in Dushanbe. General Fahim had taken over after Massoud was mortally wounded in an attack, thought to have been perpetrated by Al Qaeda, on September 9.

Reports circulated during early October that Russia was offering more than overt supplies of military equipment to the United Front. Some sources suggested that Moscow had actually supplied the front with Russian troops, who were assisting the rebels in their drive on Kabul. This was thought to be ostensibly a face-saving exercise for Moscow, given that the international anti-Taliban military operation had thus far been an overwhelmingly United States-led affair. It was also thought to be an attempt by Russia to ensure that it had a seat at the table where Afghanistan's political future would be mapped out—a future that, for Russia, ensures that complete removal of the Taliban from Afghan politics and a commanding political position for the United Front.

IN RETROSPECT

Russia's and India's long-time support of the United Front doubtless has had a profound effect on the rebel coalition. Afghanistan had slipped off Washington's radar screens following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, and the United States paid scant attention to the subsequent internecine warfare that gripped Afghanistan and the eventual emergence and advance of the Taliban. The United States, which had supplied millions of dollars in defense equipment to the mujahideen during the Soviet occupation, redirected its gaze as it became embroiled in military operations in the Persian Gulf and former Yugoslavia. American companies made occasional overtures to the Taliban regime, hoping to secure lucrative transport rights to transfer natural gas and oil through Afghanistan from the Caspian Sea.

In 1998, however, Afghanistan literally reemerged on the radar screen. The United States embassies in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya were devastated by massive truck bombs that year. In retaliation, the United States launched cruise missile attacks on what it said were terrorist training facilities around Khost in eastern Afghanistan, which were allegedly operated by a previously unknown, shadowy Saudi dissident named Osama bin Laden, whose Al Qaeda organization was held responsible for the embassy bombings. Washington then sponsored United Nations efforts to place the Taliban regime under economic sanctions because it continued to harbor bin Laden.

Washington, however, did not supply any cash or equipment to the forces of the former government. Russia and India were thus left to support the United Front, who were confined to their tiny sliver

of Afghanistan, occupying between 5 and 10 percent of the country.

It frequently looked as if New Delhi and Russia (and Tehran) were backing the wrong horse. At times they were even accused of prolonging the war; their weapons and the support, it was said, were helping fuel the conflict. Critics argued that although the Taliban were vile, war was worse, and defeat of the United Front might at last bring peace to the country.

Essentially, Russia's and India's support appeared to be a gamble, since there was no certainty that the United Front would ever reoccupy the country. And it seemed that India and Russia had finally lost their bet on September 9, when Massoud was killed. Massoud was seen as the only figure capable of uniting the United Front against the Taliban. In the hours after the attack, it seemed that the United Front might tear itself apart with bitter infighting raging among the various factions.

The aftermath of September 11 averted this. Washington declared that bin Laden's Al Qaeda was the chief suspect behind the outrages on the United States, and the Taliban—who were sheltering it—were guilty by association. The coalition air assault, commencing on October 7, began to devastate the Taliban, while the United Front's morale soared to an unprecedented level. This was the military break the organization required. The rebel troops then undertook a spectacular breakout from their confines in northeastern Afghanistan and occupied over half the country, including the capital Kabul and the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, in less than a week.

SIGNING THE LEASE

Russia's and India's strategy may have proved correct. Both countries' supplies of support and equipment almost certainly helped the United Front survive in the face of the Taliban's overwhelming superiority. Their support—especially the recent deliveries of arms from Russia—has almost cer-

tainly helped accelerate the front's rapid advance across Afghanistan.

Yet, arguably, events beyond Moscow's and New Delhi's control were the catalyst. Once the United States decided to attack the Taliban and Al Qaeda, both movements were effectively finished. Sufficiently damaging the Taliban with air power would allow the United Front forces to walk across Afghanistan relatively unchallenged.

Russia and India can argue that without their support, the United Front would not have defeated the Taliban. Without the bolstered United Front, Washington and London almost certainly would have had to deploy large numbers of ground troops for a costly and bitter invasion to unseat the Taliban from power, to close Al Qaeda, to apprehend their cadres, and to impose some form of law and order in the resulting power vacuum. Because of this instrumental support, India and Russia will undoubtedly expect to have a voice in Afghanistan's future.

With the Taliban ousted from Kabul, Russia may see the Chechen training camps closed, and the threat to Central Asia will almost certainly abate. For India, the United Front probably will also shut the facilities that have been used to train militants for infiltration into its part of Kashmir. Moreover, if the United Front forms the core of the future Afghan government, Moscow and New Delhi may finally be able to work with a government that is more amenable and sympathetic to their concerns.

Of course, the United Front's sweep across the country does not represent the end game of over 20 years of conflict. The United Front still may tear itself apart and leave the country without any government, without any real prospects of reconstruction, and possibly condemned to anarchy. This will not serve the interests of the United States or Afghanistan's neighbors, least of all India and Russia. And there is no guarantee that, once in power, the United Front will still dance to Moscow's and New Delhi's tunes. As a local Afghan saying goes, "you can rent an Afghan, but you cannot buy one." ■