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Washington's Tin Ear: Inviting the Russians Back Into Afghanistan

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The Russians feel it is necessary to once again put boots on the ground and become involved in Afghanistan's internal affairs. From the Associated Press [today](#)^[4]:

U.S. and Russian drug control agencies have raided heroin and opium labs in Afghanistan in an unprecedented collaborative bust, destroying \$250 million worth of drugs, officials said Friday.

Afghan forces also were involved in the raid on four laboratories near the Pakistan border, a U.S. Embassy spokesperson said on customary condition of anonymity.

"This operation significantly damaged heroin manufacturing capabilities ... and at the same time demonstrated the will of the Afghan nation and those allies who are impacted by drug trafficking to take necessary steps to bring stability to the country," the spokesperson said in e-mailed comments. "This was a very significant operation which could not have been done by one nation alone."

Russian anti-narcotics chief Viktor Ivanov said his agency cooperated closely with the U.S. counterparts to organize the bust, which ended Thursday and destroyed 932 kilograms (2,050 pounds) of heroin and 156 kilograms (340 pounds) of opium worth an estimated \$250 million.

[According to CNN](#)^[5], the United States Drug Enforcement Agency, Department of Defense, NATO, the Afghan Ministry of Interior and the Russian drug control agency were all involved. While Mr. Ivanov stated Russia could increase the number of drug-agents it has in Afghanistan, he down played the idea that these represent Russian forces in

Afghanistan.

It is not clear how this cooperation might evolve in the future, but these two stories do provide evidence that U.S. and Russian goals, with regard to the drug trafficking problem, are somewhat opposed. While Russia wants to see the eradication of opium production in Afghanistan in order to stem the flow of heroin to its estimated two million addicts, the United States at least recognizes that decimating the poppy fields of average farmers in Afghanistan drives them to the Taliban's cause [6].

For the time being however, officials from both countries hailed this as a major victory in the U.S.-Russian relations reset.

This may or may not be a victory in that regard. But that should remain a limited factor influencing U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. Cooperation with Russia is well and good, but when it leads to perception that Russia has a forceful presence in Afghanistan once again, this can only undermine U.S. strategy. The memories of the Soviet occupation are still fresh and bitter in the minds of many Afghans. Despite what Mr. Ivanov claims—that these agents do not represent military forces—it is doubtful many Afghans believe that assurance.

Whatever the objective of this cooperation, it is a clumsy move by the United States that may have negative long-term effects on the mission in Afghanistan [7].

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