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Biden's Big Mouth Bites Russia

By [Malou Innocent](#)

Russia has no obligation to bend one way or the other. The country still exerts strong influence over most Central Asian states, including those directly bordering Afghanistan. In fact, Russia recently allowed—after nearly eight years of war—the United States to use its airspace to transport troops and military equipment into Afghanistan. After Mr. Biden's comment, there appears to be a gap between the Obama administration's objective of stabilizing Afghanistan and the means with which they hope to achieve it. Gratuitously antagonizing Russia risks prompting officials in Moscow to either retract their concession on Afghanistan, to pressure Central Asian republics to act in kind – or both.

Vice President Joe Biden recently claimed that, because Russia's economy is “withering,” Moscow will have to bend to the West, specifically on issues relating to the former Soviet republics and the reduction of its nuclear arsenal. But what Mr. Biden seems to be forgetting is the important role that Russia can play in the war in Afghanistan – after all, the road to Kabul runs through Moscow.

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Currently, nearly 75 percent of U.S. and NATO supplies for troops in Afghanistan must travel through deteriorating security conditions in neighboring Pakistan. Therefore, Washington has begun to court Central Asian republics for alternative logistical routes into land-locked Afghanistan.

One corridor under consideration would start in Latvia, travel by rail through Russia, then to Kazakhstan and onward to Uzbekistan. Another would start in Georgia, sail by ferry across the Caspian Sea to Kazakhstan, travel by train and by truck, then split, either continuing through to Uzbekistan and then on to Afghanistan, or through Tajikistan and on to Afghanistan. But after Kyrgyzstan's government flirted with the idea of ending America's use of its Manas Air Base, following Russia's announcement of billions of dollars in new aid for the country, the message was loud and clear: Russia is an essential element in reaching Afghanistan.

Russia has over 20,000 military personnel in Tajikistan protecting the Tajik-Afghan border. Moscow also has operatives among the leaders of Afghanistan's Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance, the ethnic Uzbek party Junbish-i-Milli-Islami, and even in the Afghan government itself, such as Afghan defense minister, Mohammad Qasim Fahim, a Soviet-trained intelligence officer, military leader of the Northern Alliance, and one of President Hamid Karzai's two vice-presidential candidates in the August 2009 elections. Moreover, Afghan tribal chief, Ajmal Khan Zazai, argues that America's cooling ties with Karzai have pushed him into Russia's arms.

Shortly after 9/11, Glen Howard, an analyst who specializes in Caspian defense and security issues, said Russian efforts to bestow legitimacy and act as regional patron to Afghanistan's ethnic minorities, principally those in the Northern Alliance, was Moscow's attempt to preserve its position in Afghanistan following the

defeat of the Taliban. “It is becoming increasingly evident,” Howard said, “that if matters continue to develop in the current direction, the real winner in Afghanistan will not only be the Northern Alliance, but also Russia.”

In addition to Russian dominance in Central Asia, it also has influence in the Persian Gulf, specifically with Iran. Russia, a veto-wielding member of the U.N. Security Council, has helped Iran construct its first nuclear power plant at Bushehr. Given America’s frosty relations with the Islamic Republic, Moscow is one of the few great powers with leverage over Tehran and its nuclear program.

Earlier this month, President Obama and his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, signed a deal to allow the United States to use Russian airspace to transport troops and lethal military equipment into Afghanistan. But if Washington is serious about stabilizing Afghanistan and working collaboratively—rather than unilaterally—in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons to rogue regimes, Obama cannot afford his second in command making unpredictable and disparaging remarks.

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