

# For a Fistful of Dollars



strategic goals Russia is prepared to share. Quite a return on a \$2 billion investment.

Intolerable, did you say? Did I hear, “unacceptable”? Perhaps so. And indeed, there would be a much more practicable and convenient alternative. Point is, I

doubt very much President Obama would dare to take it.

Iran is uncompromisingly hostile to the Taliban on religious even before political/strategic grounds, and the resupply route from the Iranian harbours or/and through the Iranian airspace is by far the most logical alternative to the Karachi-Khyber Pass-Kabul line. Indeed, at least some European members of the ISAF missions are already using it, although this receives very little publicity due to easily understandable reasons. But for the US to go along this particular road, it would require short of a broader strategic agreement and reconciliation with Iran, at the very least a considerable toning down of the belligerent reciprocal hostility of the past few years – including almost certainly the willingness to tolerate an Iranian nuclear programme that would be brought back under full IAEA control for strictly civil applications.

It could be argued that such a move would not cause any real damage to the American strategic interests in the region, particularly if it is of help in bringing the situation in Afghanistan towards a more or less acceptable outcome. An indeed, before and after his election President Obama did send off clear signals about his intention to aim at an improvement in the bilateral relationship.

But even a partial rapprochement between the US and Iran would cut straight across the interests and ideas of Israel, whose alarm for Teheran’s intentions will if anything further rise exponentially under the new government. Should President Obama really be forced to choose between antagonising Israel on an issue, that Jerusalem regards as a life-or-death matter, or bowing to the Russians, my money is on him taking a deep bow indeed.

“Money is the sinew of war”, wrote Cicero, and right he was. Even beyond the obvious basic need to pay soldiers and buy weapons, there are some special occasions when the judicious disbursement of even relatively small amounts of money will bring home truly spectacular strategic results, which it would be very difficult and risky to try and reach through military force.

A very interesting recent example of the above approach is the Russian government’s brilliant decision to lend a helpful financial hand to cash-strapped Kyrgyzstan with a \$2 billion loan at very favourable credit conditions – whereupon the Kyrgyz government immediately gave the US six months’ notice to evacuate the air base at Manas. With an investment equivalent to less than three day’s worth of the cumulative cost of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Kremlin has deprived Washington of its last major base in the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia, and has placed the US and to a lesser extent NATO in a rather difficult predicament as regards supporting the ISAF and OEF forces engaged in an increasingly difficult struggle against the Taliban and other insurgents in Afghanistan. Further, for the US to extricate itself from this predicament would necessarily require pretty unpalatable diplomatic and political concessions.

Supporting the some 70,000 US/NATO troops in Afghanistan (plus more to come) requires bringing in several thousand tons of supplies every day. Geographical and practical conditions dictate for at least 70% of these supplies to go through Pakistan, most of it by land across the Khyber Pass. While the notion of insurgents operating on both sides of the border ever managing to close this main route for a significant period of time is of course preposterous, the increasing boldness and success of their attacks suggests a strong rationale for alternative land and airlift routes to be opened. Hence, the recent visits by Gen. Petraeus to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to reach agreements on the so-called “northern lines of communication”. In this context, the loss of Manas is a major retrograde step.

Now Russia in strategic terms is if anything even more alarmed than the US by the prospect of an Islamic fundamentalist regime returning to power in Kabul, and indeed it is already providing assistance for the resupply of US/NATO forces (although it does not allow the transit of weapons and other combat supplies through its territory) and has shown no sign of wanting to stop this. The Russian move in depriving the US of Manas is thus almost certainly not aimed at undermining Western operations in Afghanistan per se, but rather at placing the US administration in a position, whereby they would have to rely of Moscow’s support and benevolence – and, oh yes, pay a small price for it.

For given the Manas precedent, it appears rather unlikely that any of the “Stans” would be willing and prepared to accommodate the US requests for bases, right of passage and support against a clear “nyet” from Russia, the more so if such a denial is sweetened by appropriate financial handouts. Washington could certainly, even under the current dramatic financial crisis, try and overbid Moscow in buying the “Stans” wholesome – but this would be a rather risky business, fraught with unforeseeable consequences. In theory, the Americans could even try to mend fences with Uzbekistan’s president Islam Karimov, whom they tried to topple in a “colour revolution” that went horribly wrong, and ask him (directly or through the Russians) to reopen the Karshi-Khanabad air base, from which they were expelled in 2005. One way or another, Russia holds the keys to Afghanistan.

The price for Russian acquiescence and support would be, to put it simply, to make US Vice-President Biden eat his words at the Munich Security Conference, and acknowledge that Russia does indeed have a “sphere of influence” – most particularly in Central Asia – and that this sphere shall be respected. The US military could conceivably be granted the right to use the air bases and supply routes in this area they need, but it will be clearly understood that this will happen at the sufferance of Russia, and strictly in view of but those

  
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