



Promoting a more transparent and accountable NATO

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# NATO forces to exit Afghanistan via Russia and the Baltic?

*Nigel Chamberlain, NATO Watch*

*Kommersant*, a Moscow newspaper, reported in early February that sources at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had informed them that [Russia and NATO](#) were reaching the concluding stage of negotiations for the use of Russian bases for the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. The city of Ulyanovsk has the necessary airport and rail infrastructure for onward transport to seaports on the Baltic. The paper suggested economic and political benefits could accrue to Russia from this agreement. Apparently, Prime Minister Putin would need to sign a decree on behalf of the government to make the agreement lawful.



interested in having those who counter issues facing Russia inside Afghanistan do their job efficiently.” He added, “We are helping the coalition.....as a means to assist those who are eradicating the threats of terrorism and drug trafficking in Afghanistan”.

Clarifying the statement later, the [Russian Foreign Ministry](#) stressed that there would be no NATO infrastructure built in Ulyanovsk and that, “Civilian facilities are planned to be used for temporary storage to ensure possible transit that will be carried out under Russian customs control. No NATO personnel – military or civilian – are envisaged.”

Confirmation of the proposal came in mid-March from [Dmitry Rogozin](#), Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister for the defence industry and Ambassador to NATO until December 2011, “We are talking about a so-called multimodal transit of non-lethal cargoes to serve the needs of international security assistance forces in Afghanistan.” He added, “This will be a commercial transit, which means the Russian budget will get money from it.”

The following day, [Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov](#) told the State Duma that “This draft agreement ...has not entered into force yet, it has not yet been considered by the government. ...We are

A senior NATO official said that Russia had not formally approved use of the airfield and that it was too soon to say much about it. Yet there were indications that Russia’s overture was coinciding with renewed willingness by the Pakistani government to allow overland shipments — though at a much steeper financial cost than before.



(“NO TO NATO NARCO-BASE!”, graffiti on a building in Ulyanovsk, Russia – photo credit: *Oriental Review*)

Oana Lungescu, a spokeswoman for NATO headquarters in Brussels, said the relationship with Moscow was mutually beneficial and that, “Russian cooperating on transiting equipment to and from Afghanistan has

never been a problem, because stability in Afghanistan is in both of our interest."

There has been an agreement for [NATO to use Russian territory](#) for Afghan-bound cargoes since 2009 and in 2011 that agreement was extended to permit US-bound cargo through Russia in preparation for the US withdrawal in 2014. It is still unclear whether the recent discussions are preparing the group to extend the agreement to cover troop withdrawals.

On 14th February, [Ambassador Koliinda Grabar](#), NATO Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy, met Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mr. Sergei Ryabkov in Moscow. It is not known if this issue was discussed but she did conclude that the, "NATO-Russia partnership has a solid foundation and a promising future."



(Top NATO Public Diplomacy official visits Russia, 13 February 2012 – photo credit: NATO Information Office Moscow)

Asked to comment further, an official told NATO Watch that it would be premature to anticipate the outcome of the discussions, still in their early stages, but:

*NATO has started to plan for the eventual redeployment of ISAF equipment from Afghanistan. The Alliance is looking into a range of options, which could eventually include using Ulyanovsk as a transit point. This possibility is currently being discussed with our Russian partners. We appreciate the cooperation we already have with Russia on transit both to and from Afghanistan and we look forward to reinforcing it.*

*It is important to underline that there will be no NATO troops on the ground in Russia and that the cargoes in question will not include weapons. The bulk of the cargo will be everyday items. The concept under discussion is to pass cargoes through Ulyanovsk airport and railway station, not to set up a storage point. It is a wholly commercial venture with freight forwarders offering a door-to-door service.*

A [Novosti journalist](#) commented, "Ironically, it is the government of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, well known for his deep-seated suspicion of the US-led alliance, that has actually been making the case in favour of the deal."

At the end of February, Vladimir Putin outlined his foreign policy objectives in an article, '[Russia and the Changing World](#)'. Here are a few selected extracts which may give some insight into future Russia-NATO relations:

*We intend to be consistent in proceeding from our own interests and goals rather than decisions dictated by someone else. Russia is only respected and considered when it is strong and stands firmly on its own feet.*

*Russia has generally always enjoyed the privilege of conducting an independent foreign policy and this is what it will continue to do. In addition, I am convinced that global security can only be achieved in cooperation with Russia rather than by attempts to push it to the background, weaken its geopolitical position or compromise its defences.*

*It is through this prism that we perceive some aspects of U.S. and NATO conduct that contradict the logic of modern development, relying instead on the stereotypes of a block-based mentality. Everyone understands what I am referring to – an expansion of NATO that includes the deployment of new military infrastructure with its U.S.-drafted plans to establish a missile defense system in Europe. I would not touch on this issue if these plans were not conducted in close proximity to Russian borders, if they did not undermine our security and global stability in general.*

*Our arguments are well known, and I will not spell them out again, but regrettably our Western partners are irresponsible and are simply brushing them aside.*

*We are worried that although the outlines of our "new" relations with NATO are not yet final, the alliance is already providing us with "facts on the ground" that are counterproductive to confidence building. At the same time, this approach will backfire with respect to global objectives, making it more difficult to cooperate on a positive agenda in international relations and will impede any constructive flexibility.*

*It seems that NATO members, especially the United States, have developed a peculiar interpretation of security that is different from ours. The Americans have become obsessed*

*with the idea of becoming absolutely invulnerable. This utopian concept is unfeasible both technologically and geopolitically, but it is the root of the problem.*

*The probable future of Afghanistan is alarming. We have supported the military operation on rendering international aid to that country. However, the NATO-led international military contingent has not met its objectives. The threats of terrorism and drug trafficking have not been reduced. Having announced its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, the United States has been building, both there and in neighboring countries, military bases without a clear-cut mandate, objectives or duration of operation. Understandably, this does not suit us.*

*As I've said before, US plans to create a missile defense system in Europe give rise to legitimate fears in Russia. Why does that system worry us more than others? Because it affects the strategic nuclear deterrence forces that only Russia possesses in that theatre, and upsets the military-political balance established over decades.*

*The inseparable link between missile defense and strategic offensive weapons is reflected in the New START treaty signed in 2010. The treaty has come into effect and is working fairly well. It is a major foreign policy achievement. We are ready to consider various options for our joint agenda with the Americans in the field of arms control in the coming period. In this effort we must seek to balance our interests and renounce any attempts to gain one-sided advantages through negotiations.*

*Russia intends to continue promoting its security and protecting its national interest by actively and constructively engaging in global politics and in efforts to solve global and regional problems. We are ready for mutually beneficial cooperation and open dialogue with all our foreign partners. We aim to understand and take into account the interests of our partners, and we ask that our own interests be respected*



(Putin is coming, Queensway, London, 4 March 2012 – photo credit: yurri/ flickr)

Ideas, feedback, suggestions? We want to hear from you. Please [contact us at NATO Watch](#) with any news and stories for the Observatory, as well as feedback or suggestions on this briefing.

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