

---

---

## СТРАНЫ И РЕГИОНЫ ПОЛИЦЕНТРИЧНОГО МИРА

UDC 327

### Constructing Narratives about the Taliban by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs

*K. A. Golubev*

St. Petersburg State University,  
7–9, Universitetskaya nab., St. Petersburg, 199034, Russian Federation

**For citation:** Golubev K. A. Constructing Narratives about the Taliban by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. International Relations*, 2019, vol. 12, issue 2, pp. 229–241. <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu06.2019.208>

The paper focuses on the specifics of the Russian Foreign Ministry's rhetoric about the Taliban Movement during the period between 1999 and 2018. Using a morphological approach to analysis of the narratives produced by the Ministry, it is demonstrated that the main characters within those narratives had gone through significant metamorphoses over the studied period, echoing the shifts in Russia's self-identification and the latter's perception of the relevant actors, as well as in its policy towards Afghanistan. Thus, Russia no longer seeks the approval of the international community, nor does it speak like a partner of the West. Rather it tends to act alone by taking the initiative of bringing the Afghan warring parties together at the negotiating table in Moscow. Russia's representation of the Taliban Movement went a full circle from "a real force existing in Afghanistan" to "a criminal force" that has no legitimacy and back to "an integral element of the Afghan society" with whom seeking a peaceful reconciliation is deemed necessary. Its representation of the United States, on the contrary, changed from "ally" to "foe." Given that the Russian policy towards Afghanistan is heavily dependent on Russia's relationship with the United States of America, and if the downward spiral of that relationship continues, one should expect it manifest in a more overt Russian support for the Afghan opposition, resulting in an indirect war by proxy between the two powers in Afghanistan.

*Keywords:* Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taliban, narrative construction.

### Introduction

The analysis of narrative construction has long been a genre of discourse analysis to make sense of the world that surrounds the narrator, as well as of the latter's intentions and self-identification at the moment of production of a narrative. Initially it was "in the

areas of folklore and myth” that one discovers the greatest interest in narrative shown by researchers, mostly anthropologists, to describe and interpret such societal phenomena as “rituals, technology, social organization, and cultural artefacts” in order to understand people’s worldviews and cultural postulates of the past [1, p.244]. The invention of the formalist approach to narrative analysis is generally attributed to Vladimir Propp, a Russian folklorist who attempted to explain the morphology of Russian folktale. His basic idea was to develop a method of deconstructing a folktale to produce a finite number of functions [2, p.21] or meaningful actions (the basic components or elements of the tale [2, p.21, 71]) that characters perform, oftentimes uniquely, depending on their intrinsic properties or capabilities. Propp’s idea was further developed by Claude Levi-Strauss, a French anthropologist, who claimed that any traditional narrative, despite its superficial variations, “deals with a limited number of basic themes” (cit. in [3, p.153]) or, as Propp would put it, basic ‘*motifs*’.

Later, interactional research (Burke, Mead, Goffman, etc.) revealed that storytelling is rarely a monologic process that solely depends on language structure but, to a large degree, is shaped through dialogue with the audience. Therefore, the aim of such analyses of the narrative in a contemporary setting is often “to discover the ways in which a narrator is both influenced by and influential on the responses of his audience” [1, p.261]. So, for example, Watson resorted to a synthesis of Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical theory and William Labov’s sociolinguistic method to derive an analytical framework for “the identification of narrative style and performance in the oral storytelling situation” [1, p.261]. Because the case with narratives produced by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) does not lend itself to a situation when both the narrator and the audience find themselves in one another’s immediate physical presence, interactional approach would not be useful for this study. However, because the dialogic nature of language “requires speakers to locate themselves within a social world” [4, p.4] and “at no point in this process is the individual regarded as autonomous” [4, p.5], “discourse produced in one context inevitably connects to discourse produced in other contexts” [5, p.42], indicating of the social worlds of those actors who produce them. Burke, in his turn, intended “to identify the substance of a particular literary act by a theory of literary action in general” [6, p. ix-x]. He was concerned with the intrinsic and extrinsic study of verbal acts, i.e. a formal analysis of particular actions and the functions which the latter perform for narrator and audience. In Burke’s theory, all verbal acts are regarded as symbolic action or symbols in action. By symbol he meant “the verbal parallel to a pattern of experience” [7, p.152]. For my purposes I shall call the resultant sets of functions, characters and their potential interactions/interrelations, in accordance with the Russian formalist tradition, the ‘*fabula*.’ By ordering the elements of the same ‘*fabula*’ in various sequences, a narrator can produce close to an infinite number of unique ‘*syuzhets*’ or narratives. The principal aim of my study here is to demonstrate how the rhetoric about the Taliban Movement (banned in Russia by the Supreme Court) produced by the Russian MFA changed between 1999 and 2018, reflecting the shifts in Russia’s self-identification within the context of its policy objectives vis-a-vis Afghanistan, which in themselves should be “viewed through the prism of security threats to itself and Central Asia,” while treating its Afghan policy as “a function of its relationship with the United States” [8, p.210].

## Methodology

The research method I adopted is more akin to discourse analysis, focusing on how the representation of the Taliban in the MFA's rhetoric was exploited and changed. More specifically, I applied what I would like to call the morphologic approach to narrative analysis. Following the idea of V. Propp, I identified a set of basic functions or meaningful actions that 'characters' or actors typically engage in within the narratives created by the MFA about the Taliban. I then traced the transformations in attribution of those functions to the 'characters' in those narratives over the studied period. It turned out that the narrator tended to either emphasise or de-emphasise the use of certain functions by certain 'characters' at various stages during the two-decade period. Critical discourse analysis of selected utterances of the narrator revealed some changes in the latter's self-identification as well.

The study was based on analysis of a corpus of approximately 650 documents<sup>1</sup> that resulted from a query of the MFA's official website, using the word 'Taliban' typed in Russian. It comprised speeches, statements, comments, press releases, press conference briefings, and interviews with the relevant officials (e. g. the President, the current and the former Ministers of Foreign Affairs, their Deputies, Ambassadors, the Special Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan, as well as MFA's spokespeople) positioned to explain Russia's policy towards Afghanistan.

The morphologic approach to the narratives about the Taliban produced by the MFA during the period between 1999 and 2018 helped identify the following functions or meaningful actions: (1) *Accusation* (e. g. accusing of human rights violations or of contacts with the Taliban), (2) *Agitation* (e. g. raising alarm about someone's actions), (3) *Condemnation* (e. g. condemning a barbaric act of terrorism), (4) *Invocation* (e. g. calling on a party to end hostilities or to abide by humanitarian law), (5) *Disregard* (e. g. ignoring the opinion of the international community), (6) *Restriction* (e. g. imposing or tightening sanctions against some party), (7) *Violation* (e. g. violating human rights), (8) *Discrimination* and *Persecution* (e. g. discriminating against women and children, displacing large numbers of people), (9) *Domination* (e. g. striving to forcefully resolve a conflict, or trying to seize all of state power), (10) *Destruction* (e. g. destroying shrines and holy sites, the economy, or the infrastructure), (11) *Confrontation* (e. g. starting an armed conflict), (12) *Capture* (e. g. capturing a city, a province, hostages, and etc.), (13) *Retreat* (e. g. receding into the mountains after the defeat), (14) *Management* (e. g. managing the economy of the country), (15) *Squander* (e. g. mismanaging the economy or resources of the country), (16) *Drugs Production* and *Trafficking* (e. g. turning the controlled territory into a global centre for drug production), (17) *Terrorism* and *Extremism* (e. g. encouraging international terrorism, committing acts of terrorism, and etc.), (18) *Recuperation* (e. g. reinstating one's capabilities after being ousted or defeated), (19) *Administration* (e. g. running the bodies of state power), (20) *Training* (e. g. training the units of a regular army or police), (21) *Election* (e. g. electing or being elected to the bodies of state power), (22) *Negotiation* (e. g. negotiating a peaceful resolution of the conflict), (23) *Reconciliation* (e. g. seeking national reconciliation), (24) *Celebration* (e. g. taking part in festivities), (25) *Integration* (e. g. taking control of a territory, creating an alternative branch of power), (26) *Conquest* (e. g. ousting the enemy from power), (27) *Protection* (e. g. defending civilians or the rights of ethnic or religious

---

<sup>1</sup> Russian to English translation of the excerpts cited in this article was made by the author in such a way as to preserve their original sense and style as much as possible.

minorities), (28) *Counteraction* (e. g. countering the threat of terrorism and extremism), (29) *Conspiracy* (e. g. conspiring against another country or government), (30) *Sabotage* (e. g. supplying a warring party with arms, foreign fighters, and etc.), (31) *Assistance* (e. g. providing assistance to an ally), (32) *Victimhood* (e. g. being victimised and killed in large numbers (about civilians) or undergoing hardships such as famine, displacement, and etc.).

The above functions could be performed by different actors nominally cast as one of the following basic characters: (1) *Antagonist*, (2) *Hero*, (3) *False Hero* (4) *Observer*, (5) *Legitimate Authority*, (6) *Challenger*, (7) *Ally*, (8) *False Ally*, (9) *Victim*.

As one should notice, some functions have elements of congeniality and could be bundled together. For example, *Accusation*, *Agitation*, *Condemnation*, and *Invocation* are interrelated and could be performed by the same actor (an international organization, the UN, a state, and etc.) cast in the role of an *Observer*. In fact, most characters have a tendency to perform only certain types of functions and not the other types. For example the *Antagonist* can never perform the functions of *Condemnation*, *Protection*, or *Assistance*, but is well suited for the functions of *Violation*, *Squander*, *Drugs Production*, *Discrimination*, and the like. To be cast as character of a certain type the actor must possess or be attributed the relevant properties.

## Discussion

Initially, the MFA tended to assign the functions characteristic of the *Antagonist* to the Taliban, while Russia was being positioned as *Observer* who had a salient self-identification with the international community<sup>2</sup>. The United States and the West in general were cast as *Allies* of Russia, while the Chechen separatists were being labelled as *Ally* of the *Antagonist*. Following the U.S. decision to launch its military operation against the Taliban, the United States and NATO were 'promoted' to play the role of the *Hero* with Russia as their *Ally*. By 2014, the United States and NATO had been 'demoted' to *False Heroes*, the Taliban had progressed to act as *Challenger*, while a new actor, namely the Islamic State (banned in Russia by the Supreme Court) had been designated to perform the *Antagonist*.

In the period prior to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the consequent U.S.-led operation in Afghanistan, by drawing on some of the aforementioned meaningful actions, the MFA was trying to frame the Taliban as the *Antagonist* so as to achieve two distinct foreign policy objectives: (1) to limit the ability of the Taliban to militarily overpower the United Front, particularly the Northern Alliance, the latter being regarded as a natural ally of Russia and a bulwark against the extremist ideology and other potential threats that, according to Moscow, stemmed from the jihadist movement of the Taliban, with a view to impel it to enter negotiations with the United Front to form a common government, and (2) to prompt Russia's western 'partners' to change their diverging position on the 'anti-terrorist operation' in Chechnya to be more in line with its own, thereby lightening their pressure against what they saw as 'Russia's human rights violations'. The intention was to link the "Taliban-supported terrorist network" to the "Chechen separatists". To illustrate, let us consider a typical example of the MFA's rhetoric of the period<sup>3</sup>. The morphologic approach to it reveals the narrator's self-positioning as *Observer* firmly

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the moment that Moscow landed the role of an outside observer, "buying into the U.S. strategy," was "by the start of operation Desert Storm in January 1991". See [9, p. 5].

<sup>3</sup> Speech by Russia's Representative Gatilov, G.M. at a meeting of the UN Security Council (27.08.1999).

on the side of the “international community”, from whose standpoint one “cannot but raise alarm” and “note with particular concern” the ‘bad’ actions of the *Antagonist*. The use of the first person plural “we”, as hypothetically opposed to “the Russian side”, or “the Russian delegation”, places the *Antagonist* clearly in opposition to all other ‘characters’ including Russia, in fact, to the rest of humankind as the Other. The Afghan population is cast as *Victim* who serves the function of *Victimhood*. The Taliban, acting as *Antagonist*, has a range of functions, namely *Confrontation*, *Violation*, *Persecution*, *Drug Production*, and *Terrorism*. Russia as *Observer* is given the functions of *Agitation*, *Accusation*, and *Invocation*. The clauses of the narrative are arranged so as to firmly establish in the minds of the audience the order in which the events happened — “violent armed confrontation”, which led to the consequent “aggravation of suffering”, had been “initiated by” the *Antagonist*, and so had the ensuing “gross violations” as the “actions by the Taliban”. As for the *production format* [10, p.227–230] of the narrative, it is styled ideologically very much in accordance with the orders of UN discourse to fit the *scene*<sup>4</sup> of the event and to meet the expectations of the primary audience. From Ervin Goffman’s perspective on the speaker roles, the authorship of the above narrative seems to have been a collective effort, so it can hardly be attributed to the *animator* [10], i. e. the narrator of the above text, for not only it contains multiple intertextually recurrent utterances typical of the MFA’s rhetoric of the period, one of its parts, namely the last three lines were reproduced verbatim later that year by A. Y. Granovsky, the Deputy to the Russian Permanent Representative, in his speech at a UN plenary session<sup>5</sup>. Such sharing of repertoire aims to establish ideologically common ground and create alignments of solidarity between the members of a collective whose every speech act follows the same line of strategy.

For an illustration of the intent by the Russian officials to represent the existence of a close relationship between the “Taliban-supported terrorist network” and those who they referred to as “extremists” in Chechnya, consider the way that S. Ivanov, then Russia’s Foreign Minister, put it in his speech at a session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in which he referred to “the establishment of, so to say, diplomatic relations with the Chechen extremists by the Taliban”<sup>6</sup>. A few weeks later, the MFA raised a concern about “the territory controlled by the Taliban turning into a support base for international terrorism and extremism, including those of Chechnya”<sup>7</sup>. Both utterances assigned the function of *Terrorism* to the Taliban and the Chechen separatists equally, casting the latter as the *Ally* of the former. Then again, in July, the MFA alleged that the Taliban Movement maintained “a close relationship to the Chechen separatists,” in evidence of which it cited the fact that “on January 23, the opening of the Chechen ‘Embassy’ in Kabul was announced”<sup>8</sup>.

Still, it has to be pointed out that, as Ambassador to Tajikistan M. A. Peshkov once explained in his interview with the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, the idea that the Northern Alliance and the Taliban were both seen by Moscow as “real forces existing in Afghanistan”, and that “no government or management authority may come about without them both

<sup>4</sup> The speech was delivered at a meeting of the UN Security Council.

<sup>5</sup> Speech by Russia’s Permanent Representative Granovsky, A. E. at the UN Plenary Session (10.12.1999).

<sup>6</sup> Speech by Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov at the session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (27.01.2000).

<sup>7</sup> Press release on the visit to Moscow by acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan M. Abdullah (21.02.2000).

<sup>8</sup> Press release on the situation in Afghanistan (20.07.2000).

taking part in it”<sup>9</sup> was a commonly held belief that guided Russia’s policy towards Afghanistan before the events of 9/11. Hence Russia’s constant calling on the Taliban to abide by the relevant UN resolutions and to get back to negotiations with the United Front. However, this recurrent *motif* was abandoned immediately after the U. S. had decided to launch its military operation in Afghanistan against the Taliban, following the 9/11 attacks, therefore, a new *motif* emerged within the orders of political discourse in Russia, more specifically that of “no place for the Taliban in the bodies of state power of Afghanistan”. Thus, in their common statement on Afghanistan, Russia’s President V. Putin and President of the United States G. Bush declared that “there can be no place for the Taliban Movement in the future bodies of state power of Afghanistan”<sup>10</sup>. A few days prior, in a similar vein, Sergey Lavrov, then Russia’s Permanent Representative at the UN, had already drew on the new *motif*, producing a similar narrative during his speech at a Security Council meeting, when he stated that “there can be no place in the bodies of state power of Afghanistan for the Taliban Movement which has stained itself by supporting international terrorism” and that “[w]ithout the elimination of this anti-popular and criminal force, one cannot count on the ultimate eradication of terrorism in Afghanistan”<sup>11</sup>. Likewise, the Heads of States — members of the Commonwealth of Independent States — declared their “support for the process of a political settlement in Afghanistan under the aegis of the UN, leading to the replacement of the Taliban who has lost its right to be represented in the bodies of state power”<sup>12</sup>. Interestingly, from about that same period, there emerged a new element in the discursive practice [11] to use the words “Taliban” and “Al Qaeda” in tandem<sup>13</sup>. This practice held up until about early 2009, when a new *motif* emerged, namely that of “the need to forge contacts with the moderate wing of the Taliban Movement”<sup>14</sup>.

Thus, although one of its policy objectives — to force the Taliban to negotiate a peaceful resolution of the Afghan conflict — had not been achieved, now Russia sought to profit from having Afghanistan be stabilised by NATO coalition (the *Hero*) without getting personally involved militarily or financially. Besides, its second policy objective to prompt the West, most importantly the United States, to recognise the Chechen rebels as terrorists on par with the Taliban had been well accomplished, thereby lifting off much of the criticism that used to come from Russia’s western ‘partners’.

A few years later, however, changes in the MFA’s rhetoric became apparent. Already by March 2003, alarming notes began to sound in its narratives that revolved around a new *motif*, namely that of a “re-emergent Taliban”. Among them, such utterances as “security threats stemming from the attempts by the Taliban and Al Qaeda adherents to regroup”<sup>15</sup>, “concern over the efforts by former members of the Taliban Movement

---

<sup>9</sup> Interview of Russia’s Ambassador to Tajikistan Peshkov, M. with the newspaper “Nezavisimaya Gazeta” (31.07.2001).

<sup>10</sup> Joint statement on Afghanistan by Russia’s President V. Putin and U.S. President G. Bush (15.11.2001).

<sup>11</sup> Speech by Russia’s permanent representative Sergey Lavrov at the Security Council meeting on the situation in Afghanistan (13.11.2001).

<sup>12</sup> Statement on the situation around Afghanistan by the Heads of CIS Member States (03.12.2001).

<sup>13</sup> Russia’s report to the Counterterrorist Committee of the UN Security Council (27.12.2001); Interview of Russia’s President V. Putin with The Wall Street Journal, Moscow (13.02.2002); Speech by Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs I. Ivanov at the meeting of the PACE Standing Commission on “The Role of Russia in European Business” (26.03.2002).

<sup>14</sup> Interview of Russia’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs A. Borodavkin with the news agency “Interfax” (25.03.2009).

<sup>15</sup> Joint Russian-Iranian statement (590-11.02.2003).

and Al-Qaeda, directed to the restoration of their structures”<sup>16</sup>, “the risk of a revival of activity of the Taliban and Al Qaeda”<sup>17</sup> had permanently inhabited the rhetoric of the Ministry. Concurrently, by the late 2003, the *motif* of a “re-emergent Taliban” had been often intertwined with that of “unacceptability to let the former Taliban members into the bodies of state power”, which was a slightly milder version of the “no place for the Taliban in the bodies of state power”. Another recurrent *motif* that remained persistent was “preservation of the sanctions against the Taliban”. Frequently, there also sounded notes of disapproval of both the Kabul authorities and the United States regarding their “speculations about the existence of ‘moderate’ Taliban members”<sup>18</sup>. ‘Moderateness’ simply was not among the properties that a ‘character’ like the Taliban could possess within the ‘*fabula*’ at the disposal of the MFA as well as according to the orders of Russia’s political discourse of that period.

Often, characteristic of the rhetoric during the time, there were narratives that would justify the decision by NATO to start its military operation against the Taliban. Such stories typically hypothesised about what would happen if the Taliban had continued “to boss the show” in Afghanistan. The imaginary constructs featured “threats to Central Asia”<sup>19</sup>, “a mortal threat to Russia” and “instability spilling over across the Afghan border”<sup>20</sup>, “ideological warfare to radicalise the population of Central Asian countries”<sup>21</sup>, and etc. In parallel, the practice of framing such Chechen fugitives as Z. Yandarbiev and S. Basayev as being connected to the Taliban and, therefore, deserving to be added to the sanctions list continued<sup>22</sup>. By 2007–2008, narratives raising a concern about “diehard Taliban” intensifying terrorist activity and attempting to sneak into the bodies of state power, as well as about any possibility of lifting sanctions from its members on the part of NATO, Kabul, or international organisations had become the most frequently encountered *motifs* with the MFA. Still, by the end of 2008, some easing of the Russian position occurred, when it was agreed that “rank-and-file members of the Taliban who have not stained themselves with war crimes could be allowed to return to peaceful life”<sup>23</sup> or even “politics”<sup>24</sup>. From that time on, it was common with the MFA to talk about only “the Taliban leaders” who had to remain under the “regime of sanctions”<sup>25</sup>.

---

<sup>16</sup> Interview of Russia’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Y. Fedotov with the newspaper “Vremia Novostey” (27.03.2003).

<sup>17</sup> Interview of Russia’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs A. Losiukov with the newspaper “Vremia Novostey” (24.07.2003).

<sup>18</sup> Press conference transcript of Russia’s First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs V. Trubnikov with the Russian and Indian Media, Moscow (12.09.2003).

<sup>19</sup> MFA’s spokesperson A. Yakovenko at the Q&A session with the Russian Media regarding the onward visit to Iran by Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs I. Ivanov (09.03.2003); Speech by Russia’s President V. Putin at Columbia University, New York (26.09.2003).

<sup>20</sup> Interview of Russia’s First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs V. Trubnikov with the newspaper “Vremia Novostey” (10.09.2002).

<sup>21</sup> Interview of Secretary General of the CSTO N. Bordiuzha with the newspaper “Trud” (14.11.2003).

<sup>22</sup> Article by Russia’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs A. Safonov in the journal “Pravo i Bezopasnost” (Law & Security), Issue 3–4, December 2003 (06.01.2004); Interview of Russia’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs A. Safonov with the Russian news agency “Novosti” (20.01.2004).

<sup>23</sup> Speech by Russia’s Permanent Representative to UNO V. Churkin at the plenary meeting of the 63rd session of the UN General Assembly (10.11.2008).

<sup>24</sup> Interview of Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Lavrov with the newspaper “Vremia Novostey” (17.11.2008).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

To justify Russia's decision to let NATO use a military transport hub in Ulyanovsk, which domestically was quite a controversial issue, the common practice was to construct an imaginary scenario of Russian forces "having to militarily contain the Taliban in the territory of Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan" in case of its "victory over NATO"<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, a new *motif* that "it is not in our interest that NATO be defeated in Afghanistan" began to circulate in Russia's political discourse.

As was already indicated above, by late March 2009, utterances such as "Russia would not object to forging contacts with the moderate wing of the Taliban" has become quite common, although it was an element of the discursive practice to add that it could happen only if three basic principles were met, namely that the Taliban should "lay down arms", "recognise the Afghan Constitution", and "disengage from Al Qaeda"<sup>27</sup>.

Interestingly, the MFA's rhetoric of the time allowed for a parallel counter-narrative, namely that "there can be no moderate Taliban" just like "there can be no moderate Fascism or Nazism"<sup>28</sup>. This evidently was a reflection of a growing feeling of complexity that Russian diplomacy began to experience in navigating its policy towards Afghanistan. On the one hand, between 2001 and 2003, Russia's ardent diplomatic support for the U.S.-led military campaign was crucial in convincing the rulers in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan to let the United States open up military bases in their countries. In addition, Russia let the United States use its contacts with the Northern Alliance, which proved highly instrumental in the subsequent military operation to oust the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. Throughout the following years Russia in word and deed adamantly backed the pro-western government in Kabul against the resurgent Taliban. It provided the Afghan military with automatic rifles and attack helicopters, trained the Afghan National Army officers, opened up the Northern route to let the United States and NATO diversify the flow of supplies in and out of their military bases, and allowed NATO to establish a transport hub in Ulyanovsk. On the other, particularly following the August 2008 war with Georgia, Russia's relations with the West deteriorated to a state of permanent crisis. Moscow had placed all stakes against the Taliban. Its strategic relationship with India could suffer too, had it followed a different route. Besides, there had remained a great deal of bitterness among Russia's brass hat military towards the Mujahedeen leadership who now were at the helm of the Taliban. Let alone Russia's apprehensions connected to the possibility of a jihadist ideology 'infecting' its southern neighbours. Moreover, the Russian vision of Afghanistan had historically been influenced by the views held by its allies — the ruling elites of Central Asia. Yet, clearly, the situation with security in Afghanistan had been growing from bad to worse, and the U.S. wavering position regarding the Taliban Movement did not add clarity to what exactly Russia had to do. Hence Russia's somewhat schizophrenic policy towards Afghanistan that began to develop from around that period.

By the early Summer 2011, Russia had agreed not to object to distinguishing between the members of Al Qaeda and those of the Taliban, as well as that some 47 former func-

---

<sup>26</sup> Interview of Russia's Permanent Representative to NATO D. Rogozin with the newspaper "Krasnaya Zvezda" (Red Star) (27.01.2009).

<sup>27</sup> Interview of Russia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs A. Borodavkin with the news agency "Interfax" (25.03.2009); Interview of Russia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs A. Borodavkin with ITAR-TASS (21.08.2009).

<sup>28</sup> Interview of Russia's Ambassador to India A. Kadakin with the TV channel "Russia Today," New Delhi (05.02.2010).



tionaries of the Movement be no longer blacklisted by the decision of the Security Council<sup>29</sup>. However, the element of the discursive practice to use the “Taliban and Al Qaeda” in tandem had continued up until approximately the middle of 2013.

By the early 2014, Moscow had admitted that it was open to talks with the Taliban, although the recurrent mantra of saying that the Taliban meet the three conditions, namely “to lay down arms,” “to recognise the Afghan Constitution,” and “to disengage from Al Qaeda” had persisted until a major downfall happened in the U.S.-Russia relations in the wake of the 2014 Russia-Ukraine crisis, which accidentally was shortly followed by signing of a new Bilateral Security Agreement between the United States and Afghanistan. From that moment on, Russia began to view the United States as the *False Hero* and seemed to have totally aligned its position with those of Pakistan, Iran, and China on the desirability of a complete withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan.

That the view that Moscow held of the new U.S. strategy was negative can be discerned in the various pronouncements by the MFA. For example, in its press release<sup>30</sup>, from a linguistic analysis perspective, the construction “Afghanistan, as a sovereign state, surely, is free to sign such agreements [...]. However, [...]” where the first parenthetical admits the legality of the fact, whereas the second one denies the wisdom of it through semantically transparent contrastive meaning, suggests of an implied resentment to and a frustration with the Agreement that makes a continued presence of U.S. forces in the Afghan territory possible. A clear reason for such attitude is a perceived “security threat to third parties”, which evidently implies the threat to Russia. In another comment<sup>31</sup> regarding NATO’s new mission ‘Resolute Assistance’, the preposition “despite” expressively suggests of an existing disbelief in Moscow that the new U.S. “mission’s objectives” are purely “training and advisory” and that it does not contain a more nefarious purpose. To further illustrate the point, consider, for example, an interview of Special Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov with the Turkish Andalou News Agency in late December 2016<sup>32</sup> which reveals an extremely emotional reaction on the part of the Russian envoy, whose use of such insulting lexicon as “stupidly try”, “stupid or foolish people”, as well as a sequence of exclamations/rhetorical questions, suggests, first of all, of a very high degree of apprehension among the top Russian diplomats and political elite in Moscow of the latent U.S. capability to deploy large numbers of troops within direct proximity to Russia’s southern borders, secondly, of a similarly high degree of their exasperation with the United States dictating to the Afghan authorities the latter’s foreign policy, and, thirdly, that Russia is intent on taking all measures imaginable against the perceived threat.

That Russia did not consider the Ghani government as particularly friendly to its interests or reliable comes quite transparent from another interview of Z. Kabulov, this time with the Russian news agency Interfax<sup>33</sup>. In it, he described his recent meeting with the

---

<sup>29</sup> Briefing by MFA’s spokesperson Lukashevich (16.06.2011).

<sup>30</sup> Comment by the Information and Press Department regarding the new Afghan leadership’s agreement with the United States and NATO (2323-02.10.2014).

<sup>31</sup> Comment by the Information and Press Department on the completion of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan (2999-31.12.2014).

<sup>32</sup> Interview of Special Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan Z. Kabulov with Turkey’s news agency “Anadolu” (31.12.2016).

<sup>33</sup> Interview of Special Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan Z. Kabulov with the news agency “Interfax” (08.09.2015).

Afghan President and the senior officials as “not the most joyful experience”. The reason for his visit was to secure financing of some Russian investments to the Afghan economy with the money from international donors. On top of an overall negative assessment of the country’s economy and security situation made by the Special Envoy, the Russian companies, according to Kabulov, faced “unfair competition” and “dirty tricks” or, simply put, not being paid for the shipments by their “foreign partners”. President Ashraf Ghani promised “to look into those facts most seriously” and “to take the harshest measures”. However, the tone sounded by Kabulov was not the one of optimism. It would not be an exaggeration to say that official Kabul in the MFA’s rhetoric has morphed from *Legitimate Authority* to *False Ally*.

That the politico-military situation in Afghanistan is seen from Moscow as extremely unstable, particularly in the provinces along the border with the Central Asian states, can be illustrated by another excerpt from the comment by the Russian MFA<sup>34</sup>, in which such ‘evaluative clauses’ as “worrying reports”, “deterioration of the situation”, “large-scale offensive launched by terrorists” attacking “administration buildings”, and the like suggest of a lack of confidence in Moscow that the central government in Kabul will in fact be ever capable of reigning in the ‘terrorists’. Therefore, should it not seem ‘pragmatic’, as Russia often likes to describe its foreign policy, to hedge against those ‘terrorists’, perhaps even by banking on the Taliban who seem to have endured against all odds and now are taking over? Besides, as we already know, within the set of ‘*fabula*’ at the MFA’s disposal, the Taliban ‘character’ had progressed from being an ultimate villain not only to possess moderateness, but also to perform the function of tactical *Assistance* to Russia, particularly when those “Taliban members who combat ISIS” have “interests that coincide” with those of Russia<sup>35</sup>. Remarkably, in quite a few of his recent interviews posted by the Russian MFA, Zamir Kabulov has spoken rather degradingly of the Kabul authorities and their capabilities, while, in reverse, quite highly of the Taliban and almost defensively of the latter’s position and interests. Take, for example, his interview with the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, where he stated that “they [the Taliban] are creating a parallel branch of power (including the judicial system) in which the Afghan people have more trust than in the official one”<sup>36</sup>. By bringing together in a single line the “Afghan people”, “trust”, “parallel branch of power”, “judicial system” in reference to the Taliban, not merely legitimates the latter, but, in essence, represents it as superior to Kabul not only as seen through the eyes of the local people, but through those of Moscow as well. And then, by saying: “When they talk about it [integration of the Taliban into the Afghan politics] in Kabul, they mean that the Taliban integrate on conditions set by the Afghan government. In effect, the Taliban is very much integrated in the military and political life of Afghanistan — they control over half the territory of the country”<sup>37</sup>, an implicit idea is being put across that the “conditions set by the Afghan government” are overly unrealistic and that although the Taliban is a legitimate actor, neither Kabul nor Washington is willing to accept that ‘obvious’ fact. To further illustrate that Washington is ‘clearly mistaken’, Kabulov

<sup>34</sup> Comment by the Information and Press Department on deteriorating security in northeast Afghanistan (849-30.04.2015).

<sup>35</sup> Interview of Special Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan Z. Kabulov with the news agency “Russia Today” (15.02.2016).

<sup>36</sup> Interview of Special Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan Z. Kabulov with the Russian newspaper “Kommersant” (16.07.2018).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

goes on by marking out two positions — the ‘far-sighted’ one by Moscow who has “long been calling for” and “admonishing”, and the ‘short-sighted’ one by Washington who only now is “coming to it” at last, as usually the case with the obtuse and the stubborn — the expression “war to the bitter end” is definitely driving at that. The U.S. policy is degraded to “flips and flops” that, “after all”, following “reflections and doubts”, should result in something “more realistic and concrete”, again suggesting that the current U.S. policy remains ‘vague’ and ‘unrealistic’. The idea of “the need to seek political solutions” and “to negotiate with the Taliban Movement” is what, according to Moscow, should be done instead of “strong-arm tactics” pursued by Washington. Within the orders of the Russian political discourse the latter idea intertextually corresponds with the way Minister Lavrov has been putting it lately. For instance, in his comment on the new U.S. strategy in Afghanistan he said that “the major emphasis of this new strategy that has been declared by Washington is put on strong-arm tactics for resolution” and that “we are convinced that this strategy has no prospect”<sup>38</sup>. And at a press conference with his Pakistani counterpart Khawaja Muhammad Asif, Lavrov questioned the U.S. motives by saying: “Exactly against whom the force will be used, so far is not very clear to us”<sup>39</sup>. This utterance was made within the context of speaking about a new threat that had emerged in Afghanistan, namely from the Islamic State militants. The wording “Exactly against whom” is meant to say that it is against the Taliban, whereas the latter stands clearly in opposition to the former whom Moscow now sees as a much greater threat to its security. Thus, by applying “strong-arm tactics” against the Taliban, the United States intends, according to Lavrov’s implied reasoning, to clear the way for the Islamic State, performing the functions of *Sabotage* and *Conspiracy*. Earlier, during that same press conference, he also stated: “We are concerned that, unfortunately, the U.S. and NATO military, who are stationed in Afghanistan, are trying in every way to silence down and deny the facts of IS presence”<sup>40</sup>, where the parenthetical “unfortunately” performs a meta-communicative function of relaying the speaker’s attitude to the ‘futile’ act of “trying” to use whatever means possible “to silence down and deny” the ‘obvious,’ i.e. “the facts”. And then by adding: “According to our estimates, this IS presence in the North and East of Afghanistan is quite significant, equalling thousands of bandits. This raises the risks of terrorist penetration into Central Asia as well, while from there to make their way into Russia would not be difficult either”<sup>41</sup>, the Russian Minister was presupposing that the Islamic State militants were capable and willing to reach Russia. He associated the presence of high numbers of extremists who were crowding in the North-East of Afghanistan to nothing less than their intention to use Afghanistan as a springboard for a future invasion of Central Asia and consequently Russia. In the meantime, the United States, instead of “seeking a political solution” to the conflict in Afghanistan, was wilfully supporting the Islamic State. Worse still, those actions, according to the order of Russia’s political discourse, may have been part of Washington’s ‘conspiracy’ against Russia. As S. Lavrov explained: “We are still waiting for our American counterparts to answer the questions we have posed to

<sup>38</sup> Statement by Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Lavrov at a joint press conference with Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Kingdom of Cambodia P. Sokhon, Moscow (1571-24.08.2017).

<sup>39</sup> Statement by Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Lavrov at a joint press conference with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan H. Asif, Moscow (278-20.02.2018).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

them repeatedly, based on the public statements by governors of some Afghan provinces regarding the unmarked helicopters, which in all likelihood the NATO forces have to do with in one way or another, that fly to those regions where militants are based, while nobody is capable to explain to us the reasons for those flights, and in general they are trying to avoid giving answers to these legitimate questions”<sup>42</sup>. Here, S. Lavrov establishes the existence of a connection between “the unmarked helicopters” and “NATO forces” by using two hedges, namely “in all likelihood” and “in one way or another”. Moreover, his representations of the “American counterparts”, using a teacher-like talk, makes the Americans look like ‘culpable schoolboys’ who do not respond to “legitimate questions” which are being “posed to them repeatedly”. Conversely, the Russian side is represented to be almost like a ‘patient school principal’ who is “still waiting” while “nobody” (negative pronoun implying the Americans) “is capable to explain”. Such rhetoric suggests of what could almost be regarded as Russia’s ‘moral superiority’ over the United States perceived domestically and projected internationally.

## Conclusions

In the period of slightly less than two decades, the MFA’s rhetoric about the Taliban has undergone significant metamorphoses. Its initial discursive practice of representing the Taliban as the ultimate villain was gradually phased out. Nowadays, that role is assigned to the Islamic State and to some small factions of the Taliban. The greater part of the Taliban Movement, including its leaders, is being represented as an integral element of Afghan society with whom seeking a peaceful reconciliation is deemed necessary. Moreover, the tactical aims of the Taliban, namely to suppress the Islamic State, and the strategic ones, namely to get the foreign troops out of Afghanistan, coincide with those of Russia.

Russia’s self-identification, i.e. the representation of itself within the MFA’s narratives has changed too. Russia no longer speaks in concert with the international community, nor does it seek the latter’s approval. In fact, it often contradicts the western narrative. Nor does it speak like a partner of the West in the true sense of the word. Rather it seems trying to act alone, taking the initiative of bringing the Afghan warring parties together at the negotiating table in Moscow, where it can preside over the process. Given that the Russian policy towards Afghanistan is heavily dependent on Russia’s relationship with the United States [8, p.210], and if the downward spiral of that relationship continues, one should expect it manifest in a more overt Russian support for the Afghan opposition, resulting in an indirect war by proxy between Russia and the United States and its allies in Afghanistan.

## References

1. Watson, K. (1973), “A Rhetorical and Sociological Model for the Analysis of Narrative”, *American Anthropologist*, New Series, vol. 75, no. 1, pp. 243–264.
2. Propp, V. (1968), *Morphology of the Folktale*, University of Texas Press, Austin, USA.
3. De Fina, A. and Johnstone, B. (2015), “Discourse Analysis and Narrative”, in Tannen, D., Hamilton, H., and Schiffrin, D. (eds), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, Blackwell Publishers, Malden, USA, pp. 152–167.
4. Mannheim, B. and Tedlock, D. (1995), “Introduction”, in Mannheim, B. and Tedlock, D. (eds), *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, USA, pp. 1–32.

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

5. Hodges, A. (2015), "Intertextuality in Discourse" in Tannen, D., Hamilton, H., and Schiffrin, D. (eds), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, Blackwell Publishers, Malden, USA, pp. 42–60.
6. Burk, K. (1941), *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Louisiana State University Press, Louisiana, USA.
7. Burk, K. (1968), *Counter-Statement*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, USA and London, UK.
8. Bohn, S. (2014), "Russia's Afghanistan Policy: An Irresolute Strategy for an Uncertain Future", *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 205–221.
9. Trenin, D. (2011), *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, USA.
10. Goffman, E. (1981), *Forms of Talk*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, USA.
11. Foucault, M. (1972), *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Pantheon Books, New York, USA.

Received: November 3, 2018

Accepted: February 14, 2019

Author's information:

Konstantin A. Golubev — PhD, Associate professor; k.golubev@spbu.ru