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EUROPE NEWS | AUGUST 18, 2010, 3:46 P.M. ET

Russia in Talks to Supply Helicopters to NATO

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By RICHARD BOUDREAU

MOSCOW—Russia is negotiating the sale of about 20 helicopters for Afghanistan, stepping up efforts to help the country's U.S.-backed government battle the Taliban insurgency and drug traffickers.



European Pressphoto Agency
Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai (center), Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari (left) and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (right) speak during their meeting in the Black sea resort of Sochi, Russia.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Wednesday that Russia also had begun supplying firearms for the Afghan Interior Ministry and for police training. Until now, Russia's support for U.S.-led operations in Afghanistan has been limited to offering transit for railway shipments of nonlethal supplies as well as air corridors for weapons supplies.

Russia's tentative steps in Afghanistan, although small, are part of an effort to reassert influence in Central Asia in anticipation of a U.S. withdrawal, analysts in Moscow say.

Mr. Lavrov said Russia is awaiting a response to its proposed arrangement under which the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would pay for the helicopters. He said President Dmitry Medvedev and his Afghan counterpart, Hamid Karzai, discussed the deal during a meeting the Russian leader convened Wednesday at the Black Sea resort city of Sochi.

"There is a willingness to do this, but it naturally should be carried out on a mutual basis, primarily in terms of sources of financing," Mr. Lavrov told reporters in Sochi, Russia's Interfax news agency said. He didn't say what type of helicopters were under discussion, how much the deal would cost or the quantity of firearms Russia is providing.

NATO's purchase of Russian-made military helicopters became easier in May, when the U.S. lifted sanctions it had imposed in 2006 against Rosoboronexport, Russia's state arms dealer, for doing business with Iran.

The restrictions were ended as part of a U.S. effort to win Moscow's support for broader sanctions against Iran's nuclear program.

Russia says it won't send troops to Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union lost more than 13,000 soldiers during a decadelong occupation in the 1980s. But Moscow is worried that a return of Islamic fundamentalist rule there under the Taliban would unsettle neighboring republics of the former Soviet Union and threaten Russia's security.



"Russia naturally supports the Afghan government's fight against terrorism and is ready to help in any way," Mr. Medvedev

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Mr. Medvedev received the presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan (President Emomali Rakhmon, left) to discuss the Afghanistan settlement, the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking as well as regional trade and economic cooperation.

told Mr. Karzai at the televised start of their meeting. He said trafficking in Afghan drugs, which feed drug abuse in Russia, "is an issue for all the countries in the region. ... Our actions should be coordinated."

Mr. Karzai responded, "Afghanistan will need the support of friends and from great countries like Russia."

Presidents Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan and Imomali Rakhmon of Tajikistan, countries that border Afghanistan, joined Messrs. Karzai and Medvedev in Sochi. The four

leaders issued a statement pledging to fight terrorism and drug trafficking. Mr. Medvedev convened the same group last year as part of Russia's outreach to the region. At Wednesday's meeting, Mr. Medvedev also offered Pakistan support for dealing with the catastrophic floods that have ravaged the country, killing an estimated 1,500 people and affecting about 20 million, according to news reports.

"We are mourning together with you and we are ready to provide all the necessary assistance," Mr. Medvedev said, Interfax reported.

A Russian Emergency Situations Ministry plane delivered relief supplies to Pakistan on Tuesday, and another such flight will be conducted Thursday, the news agency said.

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