

Duma Ratifies Military Transit Deal With U.S.

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The State Duma ratified an agreement Friday to allow the United States to ferry troops and supplies across Russian territory for military operations in Afghanistan.

The Duma voted 347-95 in favor of the 2009 deal, which has already been implemented pending ratification.

Communists, who opposed the ratification, denounced the agreement with the United States as a "unilateral concession."

The U.S.-Russian transit agreement was drawn up during a trip by U.S. President Barack Obama to Moscow in 2009 in an effort to "reset" relations that had been damaged by a 2008 war between Russia and Georgia.

Currently, about 80 percent of NATO's supplies cross through Pakistan. But NATO has been trying to reduce its dependence on convoy routes through Pakistan, where they are prey to Islamist militant attacks.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told the Duma on Friday that there have been 780 U.S. flights over Russia &mdash carrying 115,000 U.S. troops and more than 19,000 metric tons of cargo to and from Afghanistan &mdash since September 2009.

Ryabkov said the air route has accounted for 16 percent of all U.S. military shipments to and from the country. He said the agreement has helped improve ties with the United States and NATO and protects Russia's interests in other areas.

Moscow said last year that the deal could also be expanded to allow vehicles in need of repair and refurbishment to be sent back to NATO countries.

But the transit deal stops short of opening the Russian route for weapons for the NATO mission in Afghanistan, where Moscow fought a disastrous 1979-89 war that killed 15,000 Soviet troops.

Russia has struck similar deals with Germany, France and Spain and has touted them as a key contribution to international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.

(AP, Reuters)

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