

Russia-NATO Cooperation on Afghanistan Disrupted by Crimea Disagreement

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BRUSSELS — NATO's decision to suspend cooperation with Russia will affect their cooperation in countering the flow of Afghan opium and keeping Afghan military helicopters flying, a NATO official said.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said Tuesday that the alliance was suspending military and civilian cooperation with Moscow after its forces occupied Ukraine's Crimea region.

Rasmussen said then that he expected Russia's cooperation with NATO in Afghanistan — on training counter-narcotics personnel, maintenance of Afghan Air Force helicopters and a transit route out of the war-torn country — to continue.

However, a senior alliance official said Wednesday that the counter-narcotics and helicopter programs would in fact be affected.

NATO and Russia jointly ran a counter-narcotics training program for officials from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, designed to counter the flow of drugs from Afghanistan, and a "helicopter maintenance trust fund" to provide technical training and spare parts for Afghan Air Force helicopters.

Counter-narcotics officials currently taking courses would complete their training but there would be no more courses jointly organized by NATO and Russia for now, the senior NATO official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"We are exploring avenues to see if there are other ways we can provide training to those counter-narcotics officials through other agencies or in cooperation with other partners," he said.

The NATO-led force still has some 51,000 soldiers in Afghanistan but they are due to end combat operations by the end of this year, leaving Afghan forces entirely responsible.

Afghan opium cultivation has hit a record high as international forces prepare to leave the country, the United Nations said last November. Moscow has cooperated in fighting Afghan drugs because Russia is a major market for Afghan heroin.

Russia accused NATO on Wednesday of reverting to the "verbal jousting" of the Cold War by suspending cooperation.

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