

REGIONAL SECURITY

**STRATEGIC FRICTION
IN AFGHANISTAN AND
GEOPOLITICAL REVERSAL
IN CENTRAL ASIA**

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**Strategic Friction
in Afghanistan**

Anyone engaged in strategic analysis should bear in mind that according to the Prussian military thinker Karl von Clausewitz, “everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war.”¹ “Friction” is impossible to forecast, yet it could appear at any moment and should consequently be reckoned with.

Friction makes it much harder to execute a strategic plan and fulfill tactical tasks; it may even make the planned aims unattainable. I shall use this term in my analysis of the peacekeeping operation and rehabilitation in Afghanistan.

The world community has found itself in a quandary: the military-strategic, political, social, economic, and psychological situation in Afghanistan has reached its limit. Today the United States

¹ Quoted from: E.N. Luttwak, *Strategy. The Logic of War and Peace*, The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1987, p. 12.

is engaged in the Enduring Freedom military operation in this country while NATO is engaged in the ISAF peacekeeping operation. The former operation is spearheaded against the Taliban and other terrorist groups while the latter aspires to stabilize the military-political situation in the country; maintain security, and encourage the rehabilitation efforts in the provinces.

The operation began on 7 October, shortly after the 9/11 tragedy, and has been going on for more than seven years now. Only some of the initial aims have been attained; moreover, in the last two to three years the situation has been going from bad to worse. Friction is coming to the fore to become one of the central factors: from time to time the Talibs carry out armed assaults; the local armed units refuse to obey central power while drug production and trafficking have reached unprecedented proportions. According to certain sources, in 2006 over 4 thousand Afghans (most of them civilians) lost their lives in armed skirmishes. This is almost three times higher than the previous year. The number of suicide terrorist acts, practically unknown in Afghanistan prior to 2002, increased from 21 to 118.

In 2007 terrorists became much more active than before: every month there were about 566 terrorist acts—the figure for 2006 was 425. In 2007, 1,500 of the more than 8 thousand victims of terrorist acts were civilians. The number of foreign contingent servicemen killed in the last two years is the highest since the U.S.-led counterterrorist coalition invaded the country and pushed the Taliban out of Kabul. In 2006, 191 coalition servicemen died in action in Afghanistan; in 2007 the figure increased to 237.²

Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, admitted that the country “is sliding” into a quagmire of corruption, lawlessness, and disorder. British Ambassador to Kabul Sir Sherard Cowper-Couls deemed it necessary to say that America’s strategy was doomed.³

The following trends, which can be described as paradoxical, also belong to the friction factors:

- The attempts of the coalition and the Afghan leaders to talk to the Taliban, which is showing no inclination either to talk or to compromise;
- The rumors about the Taliban’s mounting popularity among the local people suffering from the never-ending hostilities and their alleged willingness to move to its side;
- The country’s criminalization and militarization and the warlordization phenomenon⁴;
- Serious problems with the deliveries of international humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, the greater part of which is either looted or simply stolen before it reaches its destination;
- The Taliban is taking advantage of the absence of control over the territory, the ethnic and religious fragmentation, the country’s backwardness, tribalism, the “opium-based” economy, the country’s specific neighbors and the very complicated geopolitical situation in the region as a whole, the severe climate, the difficult terrain, and violent antiforeignism;
- The somewhat weakened unity among the NATO countries about the wisdom of continuing the operation in Afghanistan. Michael Mihalka who has analyzed public opinion in the United States and Europe about their countries’ involvement in the Afghan peacekeeping operation offers interesting sociological information about the declining share of those who support the operation in practically every NATO country.⁵

² See: M. Haydari, “Afghanistano dlia pobedy nad talibami nuzhni dopsily i instruktory NATO,” *Eurasianet*, 7 April, 2008, available at [www.eurasianet.org].

³ See: *The Guardian*, 17 October, 2008.

⁴ Warlordization is a trend associated with armed mercenary units and private armies operating outside national and international jurisdiction (for more detail, see: K. Abdullaev, “Warlordy i rekonstruktsia Afghanistana,” *Afghanistan i bezopasnost’ Tsentral’noy Azii*. Collection of articles, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Ilim Publishers, Bishkek, 2004, pp. 88-101).

⁵ See: M. Mihalka, “Pashtunistan, NATO and the Global War on Terror: ‘If you don’t fight, you cannot have peace in Afghanistan,’” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2008.

These and other factors probably add to friction in the common strategy. Not infrequently they are behind the distorted rumors about the real situation in the country and the sides' intentions. The rumors and distorted ideas may develop into friction. This does not spell defeat; situations of this sort are possible in the course of strategy [implementation]. They should be correctly understood; lessons should be learned and strategy readjusted.

On the whole the operation that started smoothly in 2001 ran into a dead end. There is a more or less popular opinion that the problem has no military solution and that a new strategy (or a road map, to use the popular term) is needed to restore Afghanistan. Michael Mihalka has rightly pointed out: "There were enough troops to 'clear,' but never enough to 'hold.' What is needed is a *clear-hold-build* strategy."⁶

It seems that the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest took an important step toward new approaches to the Afghan settlement. It offered the following four new strategic elements: stronger rule of law in Afghanistan; stronger central power; restoration of the social sphere; and prompt settlement of the Afghan-Pakistani border issue.

President of Uzbekistan Karimov formulated several new initiatives at the summit. He said in particular that his country was prepared to sign an agreement with NATO on corridor and transit across its territory of non-military cargoes through the Termez-Hayraton border checkpoint, practically the only railway communication with Afghanistan. He also presented his country's position on the issues to be resolved in Afghanistan:

- First, all urgent social and economic problems including employment, a stronger vertical of power, and its authority should be treated as an absolute priority.
- Second, the traditional religious and national-cultural values and customs of the multi-national people of Afghanistan should be respected and supported; the same applies to the interests of the national minorities.

Unjustified criticism of Islam and mud-slinging should be completely ruled out; this creates an absolutely unacceptable climate and tension in Afghanistan as well as elsewhere in the Muslim world.

- Third, it is extremely important to promote gradual and stage-by-stage reform in state development and the creation of civil institutions. To be successful the reforms should be carried out in a politically stable and economically prospering Afghanistan.
- Fourth, the border issues, in Waziristan in particular, should be resolved jointly with the leaders of Pakistan to achieve stability.
- Fifth, it is advisable to revive the negotiations on peace and stability in Afghanistan within the UN-supported 6 + 2 contact group of plenipotentiaries of Afghanistan's neighbors plus the United States and Russia, which demonstrated its efficiency in 1997-2001.

The contact group has already formulated general principles and common approaches of its members to the Afghan settlement under the U.N. aegis. In July 1999 it organized the Tashkent meeting of the warring sides and adopted the Tashkent Declaration "On the Main Principles of Conflict Settlement in Afghanistan," which served as the foundation of the resolution of the U.N. Security Council that described the meeting as an important step toward a political solution to the Afghan problem.

The latest developments, said the Uzbek president, suggested that the contact group (6 + 2 prior to 2001) should be transformed into 6 + 3 to add NATO to the process.⁷

⁶ M. Mihalka, op. cit.

⁷ "Vystuplenie Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Islama Karimova na sammite NATO/SEAP," *Narodnoe slovo*, 4 April, 2008.

The April 2008 NATO summit can be described as an important contribution not only to the world community's effort to devise practical measures conducive to the country's pacification, stabilization, and restoration but also to a more profound understanding of the essence and roots of the Afghan tragedy and the driving forces behind the conflict. Indeed, to a great extent, strategic friction is explained not merely by the specifics of the hostilities but also by the way they are perceived by those who are involved in the conflict and those who are trying to settle it.

The scope of this article does not permit a detailed analysis of the entire range of friction situations that doom the conflict settlement strategy in Afghanistan. It is important, however, to point out that friction situations, when they arise, call for non-linear strategic solutions and a careful investigation of their short-, mid- and long-term repercussions. A systemic approach to the Afghan problem sheds light on its regional and global dimensions. There is no doubt that the geopolitical implications and security challenges born in Afghanistan will primarily betray themselves in Central Asia. This shows the absolutely new role Central Asia is playing in world politics.

The future of the Afghan issue depends not only on the world powers but also on the regional states; much should be done to find new exits from the Afghan impasse. One thing is clear: wide-scale international support and the peacekeepers in the country are two important factors for its new, peaceful, and democratic future.

Several other questions can be discussed in the friction context.

(A) The Anti-Narcotic Security Belt and the ISAF:

The activity of the ISAF, which is either not ready or not willing to liquidate opium production under the pretext that there are no alternative economic branches, is offset by the efforts of the Central Asian countries and Russia to check drug trafficking by setting up what is known as a "security belt" around Afghanistan. This can be compared to a hypothetical situation in which one of the sides involved in Afghanistan and the other operating outside it are guided by different agendas and different priorities.

The United States and the coalition involved in the Enduring Freedom Operation and ISAF insist that the military operation and the anti-narcotic measures are mutually exclusive because the latter will deprive a huge number of Afghans of their means of subsistence. The Central Asian countries, however, cannot wait for their neighbor to acquire an alternative economy so that they no longer have to fight drug smuggling today.

(B) What was the main initial aim of the military operation? Is there an unstated aim?

The answer to the first question is clear: the antiterrorist struggle. After more than seven years of hostilities the aim has not been achieved not only because of friction but also due to ontological and teleological confusion. Today the world community, which some time ago dismissed the Taliban as a terrorist organization and added it to the corresponding list, is beginning to make advances toward it again.

In October 2007 President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai moved forward with a sensational statement that Mullah Omar of the Taliban and leader of the Islamic Party of Afghanistan Gulbuddin Hekmatyar could count on certain portfolios in his Cabinet. Significantly, and logically, both declined the honor. Talks with the Taliban are doomed. A new state system under international patronage, on the one hand, and à la Taliban state, on the other, are hardly compatible. Such attempts merely bring to mind the world community's blunders and errors that predated the counterterrorist operation.⁸ This explains why these efforts are incompatible with the new Big Strategy.

⁸ See: F. Tolipov, "Are the Heartland and Rimland Changing in the Wake of the Operation in Afghanistan?" *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (23), 2003.

The strategic agenda should, first and foremost, include the following questions: “Should the Taliban be defeated or engaged?” “Should we defeat the Taliban or its patrons?” Pakistan can be described as another problem: on the one hand, its indignation over the American air strikes on the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, the zone of the Pushtu tribes, was understandable from the viewpoint of a sovereign state looking after its territorial integrity. On the other, Talibs find refuge in Pakistan and should be persecuted there.

Michael Mihalka has also pointed out that the former consensus in the NATO countries about the war is weakening; there are doubts about the war’s advisability. Here is what U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said on 10 February, 2008 at the Munich Conference on Security Policy: “We must not—we cannot—become a two-tiered alliance of those willing to fight and those who are not. Such a development, with all its implications for collective security, would effectively destroy the alliance.”⁹

On the other hand, strange as it may seem, the longer the joint counterterrorist struggle of the world’s most powerful states in one of the world’s weakest states continues, the more popular all sorts of inventions and suspicions about their true aims in Afghanistan will become. We can ask in particular whether there is another agenda, a design beyond the counterterrorist agenda. Is there a geopolitical agenda independent of the security-related one? This calls for extended studies; I shall touch upon certain aspects below.

Geopolitical Reversal in Central Asia

What can be called a geopolitical reversal is taking place in Central Asia, not a totally unexpected development, to tell the truth. Foreign policy meandering and the prevailing short-term considerations of the Central Asian states came to the fore in January-February 2009 when the leaders of Kyrgyzstan decided to remove the U.S. Gansi base deployed at the Manas airdrome and used to support the mission in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are moving in the opposite geopolitical directions and are vacillating in an asystemic way in the security-related market. In 2005, when Uzbekistan demanded that the United States withdraw their contingents stationed at the Khanabad airdrome because the active phase of the counterterrorist operation had come to an end, Kyrgyzstan refused to follow suit and pointed out that the Afghan operation was far from complete. Today, when relations between Uzbekistan and the United States (and the West as a whole) have warmed up enough to start talking about the possible return of the American contingents to the republic, Kyrgyzstan performed a reverse maneuver as if it believed that the military phase of the operation was complete. This coincided with the United States’ call on the Central Asian countries to become much more closely involved in the Afghan developments (including cooperation in the military operation); America wants to be able to use the entire range of Central Asian infrastructure potentials (of which the Manas airdrome is part) to support its troops in Afghanistan.

American analyst Stephen Blank has also pointed to the rather logical connection between the Central Asian states’ domestic and foreign policies, on the one hand, and the Afghan version of the Great Game, on the other. Having analyzed the entire chain of political events, as well as the direct and indirect factors that pushed President Bakiev to make his decision, he revealed the Russia-inspired geopolitical intrigue in which Moscow exchanged its economic support of Bishkek for the withdrawal of the American base.

⁹ Quoted from: M. Mihalka, *op. cit.*

This led him to the conclusion that despite its talk about cooperation and its stated concern over the Afghan developments Russia is guided by its imperial designs and anti-American sentiments to a much greater extent than by all other considerations. Stephen Blank has written: "The Russian leaders are convinced that the CSTO can fill the security vacuum the American pullout will leave behind. It borders on absurdity, though, to think that the CSTO forces will protect the region's countries against the threat of Islamic terrorism and fundamentalism.

"What does the Kremlin want? Are Putin and other Russian leaders planning another march to the south in an effort to revise the past by staging 'Afghanistan-2'? This is improbable. Russia, however, is obviously seeking a leading role with controlling functions in the military developments in Afghanistan. The Kremlin wants to demonstrate its 'privileged interests' in Central Asia by moving the United States away from the region **even if this contradicts Russia's strategic interests** (emphasis mine.—*F.T.*). This grandiose delusion will merely complicate the struggle against the Taliban."¹⁰

The geopolitical context is obvious: all of a sudden, and at an ill-timed moment, the American base turned out to be small change in the geopolitical bargain between Russia and the United States and Russia and the Central Asian countries.

- Indeed, first, why should economic aid be tied to the withdrawal of the American base, which cannot be described as an alternative to economic assistance? In fact, it was a factor of security-related aid.
- Second, American economic aid to Kyrgyzstan was discussed during the visit of CENTCOM Commander General David Petraeus to Bishkek. It seems that Moscow used the "stick and carrot" policy.
- Third, by obeying Russia Kyrgyzstan moved away from Afghan settlement at a time when its involvement, and that of its Central Asian neighbors for that matter, is most needed. This has done nothing for its international image.
- Fourth, Moscow's pressure on Bishkek obviously contradicts its support of the initiative of moving cargoes for the peacekeeping operations across Russia and Central Asia put forward at the Bucharest NATO summit of 2008.

The above and the worsening military-political situation in Afghanistan suggest that the current geopolitical reversal should be interpreted as a signal rather than a final decision. The decision to push the Gansi base away from Kyrgyzstan is hardly adequate and hardly timely. This is too obvious. Moscow and Washington, having synchronized their moves, have most likely included Tashkent and Bishkek in the planned shifts in the Afghan campaign. They will probably arrive at a common language in the direct and indirect discussion about the settlement. At the same time, it seems that Moscow wants Washington to accept Russia's right to have the final say when it comes to drawing the Central Asian countries into the Afghan campaign. This amounts to denying the local countries the right of independent decision.

Significantly, the geopolitical reversal followed the inauguration of the new president of the United States who, as a candidate, talked a lot about his country's greater involvement in Afghanistan. This suggests that Russia, the Central Asian countries, and the U.S./NATO have different ideas about Afghanistan as a geopolitical entity. Seen from Central Asia, this country, the closest neighbor and an important element of the Heartland's new function, is the final aim, which means that stability, peace, and rehabilitation are self-sufficient values. As great powers Russia and the United States treat it no so much as an individual country but as a toehold from which they can spread their power and influence far and wide.

¹⁰ S. Blank, "Kyrgyzskaia saga. Kompleksnyy vzgliad na sobytia vokrug bazy 'Manas,'" *Eurasianet*, 5 February, 2009.

Indeed, an ever growing number of analysts discerns in American politics certain “beyond Afghan” designs, i.e. the geopolitical intention to encircle Iran with American friends and pro-American regimes. Central Asia is given the very logical role of a NATO base from which the Alliance will further spread its impact.¹¹ Those who attended the international conference “Afghanistan, SCO, Security and Geopolitics of Central Eurasia” in June 2008 pointed to the divergencies between what the coalition was doing in Afghanistan and the ISAF’s and OEF’s stated aims. Much was said about the U.S.’s alleged desire to set up a “sanitary cordon” around Russia and Iran, to create a foothold against China, to oppose the attempts to set up anti-Western blocs similar to the CTO, SCO, etc.¹²

Seemingly well argued, these statements tend to ignore one extremely important factor, namely the role, interests, and prospects of Central Asia itself. I prefer to agree with Russian analyst V. Plastun, who says that “the geopolitical stakes are too high because Afghanistan is the pivot of the strategically important Central Asian region.”¹³ **Today, as in the past, the great powers probably attach strategic importance to Central Asia, yet it is for the region’s countries to adjust it.** This means that the alarmist forecasts along the lines of the “conspiracy theory” should take into account the possible involvement of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which are dead set against anti-Russian, anti-Chinese, or any other “anti” projects.

The CSTO issue should be discussed separately. In September 2008 its Secretary General Nikolai Bordiuzha made public its members’ intention to set up a new military structure in Central Asia: “The CSTO members are alarmed by the military facilities and serious structures such as the ABM systems mushrooming around them. This suggests that we should set up a new military infrastructure on the CSTO borders and restore certain Soviet elements.”¹⁴ This is an eloquent confirmation of the “geopolitical stress” in which the Central Asian countries are functioning. One cannot but be baffled by the fact that the importance of these military structures is discussed in Russia and is practically ignored in Central Asia.

In February 2009 the CSTO summit passed a decision on the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces for Central Asia.

On 17 February, 2009 Commander of the U.S. CENTCOM General Petraeus visited Uzbekistan. The sides reached an agreement on transit from Europe to Afghanistan across Uzbekistan. International observers and the media have started talking about the Americans’ possible return to the Khanabad base they left in 2005.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

There is a certain logical connection between strategic friction in Afghanistan and the geopolitical reversals in Central Asia as mutually conditioned and mutually aggravating factors.

The geopolitical reversals are undoubtedly related to the political will and interests of the people in power and have little, or nothing, to do with classical geopolitics. This suggests a term the “geopolitics of regimes,” which is manifested in two aspects: attempts by the Central Asian regimes to gain geopolitical weight and the ad hoc reversing situation caused by the local states losing their political course.

¹¹ See: T. Shaymergenov, “Problems and Prospects of NATO’s Central Asian Strategy: The Role of Kazakhstan,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (50), 2008.

¹² See: *Afghanistan, ShOS, bezopasnost’ i geopolitika Tsentral’noy Evrazii. Materialy Mezhdunar. konf.*, ed. by A. Kniyev, Bishkek, 2008.

¹³ See: V. Plastun, “Novye tendentsii v razvitiy situatsii v tsentral’noaziatskom regione k kontsu 2004 g.,” *Afghanistan i bezopasnost’ Tsentral’noy Azii*, ed. by A. Kniyev, Ilim, Bishkek, 2004, p. 18.

¹⁴ *Kazakhstan segodnia*, 12 September, 2008 (see also [www.centrasia.org], 12 September, 2008).

Seen through the prism of critical geopolitics, these developments can be described as logical: the Heartland function was irreversibly changed when the Soviet Union, its curator, disappeared. The Heartland could not but develop into a zone of “geopolitics of regimes” because it was no longer part of a great power and therefore a static object. Today it is a stage on which the new independent states are acting (“experimenting” is a more suitable term), pushed by the whim of history and geography into the epicenter of an emerging new world order.

This explains why there are two coexisting and rivaling macro-geopolitical paradigms—imperial and democratic—in this part of the world. The former tends to restore the Heartland to its former static status, while the latter seeks a dynamic status for it based on functional openness. The micro-geopolitical vacillations of the Central Asian countries between the two paradigms are shown in the form of the foreign policy fluctuations of their regimes.

I totally agree with Azeri scholar Eldar Ismailov who says that in the new epoch the Heartland will acquire a new function, that of ensuring sustainable land communications along the parallels (West-East) and meridians (North-South) and therefore contributing to geopolitical and economic integration of the large and relatively isolated areas of Eurasia.¹⁵ This is a totally new function, which differs radically from the one Halford Mackinder put in a nutshell in his famous pronouncement.

The above suggests four conclusions.

- (1) The spontaneously emerging friction situations in Afghanistan should not delude anyone about the coalition forces’ limited potential, something that we can observe today. The mounting skepticism might develop into another friction. Indeed, what is said about the Taliban’s onslaught, about the ever larger territories falling under its control, breeds doubts. What will happen when the Talibs capture the capital? Where will the international forces be? Will they be defeated and driven away? I think that the present level of the Talibs’ activity and what is described as success can hardly reach higher points at the current level of international presence. Asymmetric wars do not end in victory of the weaker adversary; to win it should gain mass support.
- (2) Irrespective of whether the coalition has or has no “beyond Afghan” designs, the fact that keeps it together remains: there is Afghanistan; until its problem is resolved the coalition members cannot move on to other projects and designs. So far the critics of the United States and NATO have failed to offer alternative, conceptual or practical, models of the Afghan settlement. They have limited themselves to vague suggestions that the coalition forces should cooperate with the CSTO and SCO. No matter how justified the statements are about the Americans’ “beyond Afghan” designs in Afghanistan, the feeble attempts of the CSTO and SCO supporters to fit them into the Afghan campaign and company look just as geopolitically outdated. Closer scrutiny reveals that these structures have a primordial defect: they have not yet developed into security structures in their own right (this is especially true of SCO).
- (3) The geopolitical reversal in Central Asia confirmed an old truth: it is much easier to manipulate individual countries and the elements of “regime” geopolitics than to face them as a united geopolitical entity. Their micro-geopolitics may merely add to the strategic friction in Afghanistan, which will undermine their own interests. I have no doubts that Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, as members of the international counterterrorist coalition, should act in unison when it comes to the form and degree of their involvement in the Afghan settlement. Their contribution should not only be free from old geopolitics—it should be free from commercializing their involvement. Economic aid to these countries should not depend on the degree of their involvement in the counterterrorist efforts.

¹⁵ See: E. Ismailov, “Central Eurasia: Geopolitical Function in the 21st Century,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2, 2008.

- (4) If there is a key to the Afghan problem, it should be sought in Pakistan, the Afghan policy of which has successfully driven it into a corner. Today aid to Afghanistan is inseparable from extending aid to Pakistan, as a task of secondary importance. By helping the coalition the Central Asian countries may contribute to having a positive impact on Pakistan, the territory of which is used for the transit of 84 percent of the equipment moved to the American forces deployed in Afghanistan. So far the ISI is essentially the only source of intelligence about the terrorist acts al-Qa'eda and its branches in Pakistan are carrying out throughout the world.

Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid have written in their article: "Unless the decision-makers in Pakistan decide to make stabilizing the Afghan government a higher priority than countering the Indian threat, the insurgency conducted from the bases in Pakistan will continue. Pakistan's strategic goals in Afghanistan place Pakistan at odds not just with Afghanistan and India, and with the U.S. objectives in the region, but with the entire international community."¹⁶

Therefore, I am convinced that the ISAF and the counterterrorist coalition as a whole have only one option: they should move ahead keeping in mind an offensive rather than defensive strategy. The ISAF forces should be given wider powers and expand their presence. The U.N. should play a leading role in settling the country's future. It should not remain in the ISAF's and OEF's shadow but become the main manager of the entire process both at the level of the counterterrorist operation and the country's rehabilitation.

¹⁶ B. Rubin, A. Rashid, "From Great Game to Great Bargain," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2008.