

AFGHANISTAN: ITS ROLE AND PLACE IN THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY SYSTEM

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Introduction

For three decades now the country has been struggling for survival amid a never-ending armed conflict that makes a concerted foreign policy course impossible. This is fraught with a loss of statehood and is responsible for Afghanistan's role and place in the international relations system.

Afghanistan and International Security

The military-political crisis in Afghanistan is echoing across Central and Southern Asia and is spreading its negative impact even further across the world.

Farkhad Tolipov, a political analyst from Uzbekistan, has rightly noted that strategic “friction” in Afghanistan is closely connected with the geopolitical reversal occurring in the Central Asian states. He has written that “friction” makes it much harder to pursue strategic and tactical aims and that, if they are achieved at all, the cost will be enormous. The Afghan crisis is largely responsible for the geopolitical instability in Central Asia, which affects its security.¹

The foreign policy activities of the Central Asian states and the world community as a whole have to take the Afghan factor into account. President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov has written: “The deepness and acuteness of the Afghan crisis and its obvious impact on the geopolitical processes at the regional and global levels allow us to describe this tragedy as the largest and the most dangerous regional conflict of our time. The military-political crisis in Afghanistan is inevitably affecting regional stability in Central Asia and Uzbekistan’s national security, in particular, in the most negative way.”²

The military-political developments in Afghanistan have deprived the Great Game term of its initial meaning.³ In the 19th-the beginning of the 20th century, it was the British-Russian struggle; today the number of players has multiplied, while the threats the game produces affect the entire globe. “The game has become too deadly and has attracted too many players; it now resembles less a chess match than the Afghan game of *buzkashi*, with Afghanistan playing the role of the goat carcass fought over by innumerable teams. Washington must seize the opportunity now to replace this Great Game with a new grand bargain for the region.”⁴

What is going on in Afghanistan has already proven beyond a doubt that at the present stage of globalization no armed conflict of any noticeable duration in any state will remain limited to its borders. For several reasons, it will inevitably spread to create, sooner or later, numerous problems for its neighbors and destabilize the region. In these conditions, the attempts to set up and strengthen central power can hardly be consistent and systematic, while state-building efforts are limited both geographically and conceptually.

The above fully applies to Afghanistan: it is an object rather than a subject of world politics even though the world community has accepted it as an independent state with a seat in the U.N. and several other international structures. In other words, today the country is at best an eyewitness or a victim (to a great extent) rather than an active player on the world political scene. Indeed, the most important decisions relating to state-building and its foreign and domestic policies are made by others. All international conferences under the U.N. aegis on postwar settlement that produce agreements between Afghanistan and the world community are held outside the country, in Tokyo, Bonn, London, Paris, The Hague, etc. This testifies to the gravity of the situation inside the country. Any state wishing to establish and develop bilateral relations with Afghanistan has to look at Washington and the European capitals rather than at Kabul. Kabul, in turn, has to concentrate its foreign policy efforts

¹ See: F. Tolipov, “Strategic Friction in Afghanistan and Geopolitical Reversal in Central Asia,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (56), 2009, p. 44.

² I. Karimov, *Uzbekistan na poroge XXI veka: ugrozy bezopasnosti, usloviia i garantii progressa*, Izdatelskiy dom “Drofa,” Moscow, 1997, pp. 20, 25.

³ In the past Afghanistan was seen as a “geopolitical chessboard” of sorts with Russia and Britain moving the chessmen represented by Afghan leaders and groups.

⁴ B.R. Rubin, A. Rashid, “From Great Game to Grand Bargain,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2008, pp. 33.

on seeking foreign aid in the form of civilian and military equipment supplied by donor countries. Foreign companies are already involved in economic restoration. The country's numerous religious, ideological and political problems affect the international system on a global scale (illicit drug production and trafficking, illegal trade in weapons, etc.).

On many occasions in the past the conflict became uncontrollable and spread beyond the country to threaten its neighbors. The international community has somewhat remedied the situation and achieved relative stability in the north. In the south, however, the threat of a "spillover" is still real. The situation on the Pakistani-Afghan border creates conflicts between the two countries and leads to disagreements with the United States and other members of the antiterrorist coalition. This happened when the U.S. moved its troops, without consulting Islamabad, to carry out military operations on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border (on territory neither country controls).

Seeking New Solutions

There are two aspects—internal and external—of the problem. On the one hand, the international coalition is still not completely united and stable, which cannot but affect the ISAF operations and the Operation Enduring Freedom; Afghan society is not united either. In September 2008, President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari spoke about this at the 63rd Session of the U.N. General Assembly. He pointed out that the scattered American operations in Pakistan were counterproductive and merely exposed all the representatives of the antiterrorist coalition to greater danger from terrorism. The Pakistani military believed that they were taking decisive enough steps to address the problem in the country's north and would cope with it in the next six months. Seen from Washington, however, the situation on the border is going from bad to worse, and there is an urgent need to track the fighters as far as their lairs, including on Pakistani territory.

Joint operations on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border (U.S.-Pakistani, Afghan-Pakistani, or U.S.-Pakistani-Afghan) are discussed as a way out of the current disagreements. However, some of the Pakistani military do not trust their Afghan colleagues, seeing them as representatives of the Pentagon and the CIA. On the other hand, certain members of the American and Afghan military establishment suspect that Taliban sympathizers in Pakistani intelligence are guilty of information leaks, which makes joint operations of the special services ineffective.

This means that no decision on joint military operations of the United States, Afghanistan, and Pakistan against the Taliban has been made, even though antiterrorist efforts go on unabated.

Uncontrolled drug trafficking, one of the greatest dangers, is spreading far and wide. According to the U.N., in 1999 Afghanistan accounted for 75 percent of the world's opium production⁵; nearly ten years later it accounted for 90 percent (8 thousand tons).⁶ Neighboring territories serve as corridors of opium and heroin trafficking to the CIS countries, Asia, Europe, and North America. Today, drug money is used to pay the fighters, the greatest destabilizing hazard for Afghanistan and its neighbors.

The international coalition is deliberately avoiding the issue: opium poppy provides millions of Afghans with a means of subsistence. Hence the paradox: *the international forces are doing nothing to curb drug production, while this increases tension in Central Asia, which serves as a corridor for illegal trade.* This is driving the coalition's Central Asian allies into a corner: they refuse to accept

⁵ See: *Vystuplenie Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Islama Karimova na sammite OBSE*, Istanbul, 18 November, 1999.

⁶ See: *Vystuplenie Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Islama Karimova na sammite ShOS*, Dushanbe, August 2008.

the argument about drug-related revenue as indispensable for the nation's survival and cannot wait for alternative economic developments in Afghanistan.⁷

In recent years, the Afghan campaign has practically destroyed the country's poorly developed national economy and is interfering with economic contacts on a regional scale. No new transport lines can be laid to provide the Central Asian countries with access to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. This explains why the Central Asian coalition members want to finally settle the Afghan conflict.

Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid have written: "Seven years after the U.S.-led coalition and the Afghan commanders it supported pushed the leaderships of the Taliban and al-Qa'eda out of Afghanistan and into Pakistan, an insurgency that includes these and other groups is gaining ground on both the Afghan and the Pakistani sides of the border." They deem it necessary to point out: "Al-Qa'eda has established a new safe haven in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan, where it is defended by a new organization, the Taliban Movement of Pakistan."⁸ This means that a larger military contingent and more active antiterrorist raids by the Americans might end unpredictably. Many share the opinion that a wider international military presence is causing mounting indignation among the locals, on which the Taliban is capitalizing. This is true in principle, however the scale of "mounting indignation" is not in fact as great as it is made out to be.

I am convinced that this and similar friction situations should not invite a revision of the military presence conception.

In August 2009, the presidential election and its related campaign fanned domestic tension once more; the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2010 are fraught with similar complications.

Some of the world leaders, including U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, voiced their concern about the worsening military and political situation in the country caused by the much more active involvement of the Taliban, al-Qa'eda, and other extremist structures. Repeated assassination attempts on Hamid Karzai, terrorist acts in Kabul and elsewhere, and the increased number of attacks on members of the U.N. humanitarian mission and NATO military speak of the mounting aggressiveness of the power-thirsty extremists.

This is a manifestation of another Afghan problem: some think an agreement with the moderate part of the Taliban is possible. If attempted, it will fall through and cause even more disagreements among the coalition members.

On 4 April, 2009, the NATO summit held in Baden-Baden, Cologne, and Strasbourg passed several decisions designed to regulate the situation in Afghanistan. President Obama stated, in particular, that his country would dispatch 17 thousand military to the country; the European leaders promised 5 thousand military, 3 thousands of whom would comprise highly mobile units to ensure the safety of the presidential election. The others would be engaged in training Afghan military and the police.⁹

Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid, however, are convinced that better coordinated diplomatic efforts applied on a regional basis can be described as a much better strategy. The time has come to create a program designed to address several regional and global problems on a greater scale.

The authors believe that the new administration should defuse "the destructive dynamics" of the strategic and military-political rivalry between the world and regional powers over Afghanistan and the influence on the processes around it and that it should pursue its policy within the Contact Group under the U.N. SC aegis. They write that the Contact Group should consist of five permanent member

⁷ This is one of the "friction" situations that negatively affect the Afghan campaign (see: F. Tolipov, op. cit.).

⁸ B.R. Rubin, A. Rashid, op. cit., pp. 30, 31.

⁹ "Summit Declaration on Afghanistan Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Strasbourg / Kehl on 4 April, 2009, Press Release: (2009) 045, NATO 04 Apr. 2009," available at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52836.htm?mode=pressrelease].

states of the U.N. SC and probably other actors (NATO and Saudi Arabia as a member of the Muslim world which has good contacts both with Pakistan and the members of all sorts of riot groups in Afghanistan), which will strengthen Pakistan's position. Experts are convinced that a constructive dialog in this format will allow the United States and NATO to use Iranian territory as a means of alternative access to Afghanistan in order to lessen their dependence on Pakistan in this respect. The Contact Group could explain to Afghanistan's neighbors that the West is determined to address not just extremism in the region, but also economic development, job creation, the drug trade, and border disputes. This dialog should be further backed by the obligation to promote regional economic integration, including a packet of long-term international aid to the regions that suffered more than others in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, particularly the border areas.

It seems that President Obama was duly impressed: he initiated an international contact group on Afghanistan and Pakistan under the U.N. aegis with the participation of the NATO and Central Asian states, Russia, China, India, and Iran.¹⁰

It should be said that the initiative did not come as a complete surprise.

In April 2008, speaking at the NATO/EAPC summit in Bucharest, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov clearly outlined his position on the issue.¹¹

In August of the same year at the SCO summit in Dushanbe, the president of Uzbekistan reconfirmed and specified his position:

1. There is no military solution to the Afghan problem, which is recognized by a growing number of states.
2. The time has come to address the acute social ills, such as destitution and unemployment. Today, all social groups, the younger generation in particular, are seeking means of subsistence as fighters or drug pushers, etc.
3. The confessional and national specifics of the Afghans should be taken into account: this has already been confirmed by all sorts of wars waged by outside forces in this country in the past.

The revived 6 + 2 Contact Group for Afghanistan under the U.N. aegis that functioned in 1999-2001 should be expanded to include NATO, which is actively involved in Afghan settlement.

Meanwhile, old ideas still serve as a guiding light, at least for some experts. Gunter Knabe of Germany, for example, insists that the ethnically variegated country has always closed its ranks, and will close them in the future, against an external enemy. The world community should bear this in mind to prevent resistance to anything that looks anti-Islamic in the eyes of this rigorously devout nation.¹²

This can hardly suggest novel approaches to the old problem.

The international coalition entered a country torn by civil war, which explains why the nation hailed those who removed the Taliban.

It seems doubtful that all Afghans are demanding the withdrawal of the foreign occupants; the reference to the religious factor is not quite correct either: after all, the Taliban ideology proved alien to the traditional way of life. It was also denounced by the Muslim community, the OIC in particular.

This means that the key to Afghan settlement should be sought elsewhere.

¹⁰ K. DeYoung, "Obama Outlines Afghan Strategy. He Pushes Stability and Regional Partnerships," *The Washington Post*, Saturday, 28 March, 2009, p. A01.

¹¹ See: *Vystuplenie Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Islama Karimova na sammite NATO/SEAP*, Bucharest, 4 April, 2008 (see also: I. Karimov, *Po puti modernizatsii strany i ustoychivogo razvitiia ekonomiki*, Tashkent, 2008, pp. 240-244).

¹² *Materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii "Afghanistan: problemy stabilizatsii i perspektivy rekonstruktsii"*, Tashkent, 17-18 June, 2009.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

- First, we should keep in mind that no compromise on the key issues is possible. The operation seems to have slowed down because the United States, NATO, and the Afghan government tried to reach a compromise with the Taliban, which invariably declined similar approaches in the past.
- Second, the Afghans and the world community should see for themselves that Operation Enduring Freedom is a counterterrorist rather than an anti-Afghan effort. So far, it is simply impossible to wage this war with much better results, fewer losses and fewer mistakes than it is done today. It is much easier to face an enemy than to fight elusive terrorists. The war on terror requires that intelligence efforts be constantly improved and the Afghans offered new and more convincing propagandist arguments.
- Third, any concessions of the Kabul regime will trigger an offensive on all fronts—military, geopolitical, intelligence, ideological, psychological, etc.—which means that stemming the flow of volunteers wishing to join the terrorist ranks should be regarded as one of the central tasks.
- Fourth, S. Khan, a Pakistani analyst, was quite right when he pointed out that, in the eyes of the locals, the distinctions between the coalition forces and the Taliban are being gradually eroded. There is no Afghan administration to speak of at the district level in the south and southeast; the new police are corrupt through and through, while the legislative system is dysfunctional. To cope, the armed forces, meant to merely help the local civilian authorities, have to act instead of the local administrations and assist reconstruction.¹³

The above suggests that the peacekeeping operation of the international coalition in Afghanistan will not end soon. Hasty and rash decisions should be ruled out: the Taliban is capable of a war of attrition to wear down the coalition forces' morale. This means that the enemy should be defeated with a weapon of its own.

¹³ Ibidem.