

THE ARMED CONFRONTATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

The author looks at how the armed confrontation in Afghanistan affects the political and economic situation in Central Asia.

First, Afghanistan, which became a seat of international terrorism and religious extremism, as well as a foothold of the armed Tajik and Uzbek opposition in the

1990s, has developed into the real threat of a violent regime change in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In Tajikistan, the U.N. and certain other regional countries acting as intermediaries have successfully integrated the opposition into the country's peaceful development. The Uzbek opposition fighting on the side of the Taliban has been considerably weakened by the international counter-terrorist coalition.

A compromise was reached in Tajikistan through constitutional amendments that legalized the Islamic party; on the other hand, we cannot rule out the possibility that in a country with a predominant Muslim population, Islam, a legal political factor, might come to power through democratic elections (this has already happened in Egypt).

The leaders of Uzbekistan chose a different road: instead of negotiations and compromises, they squeezed the armed opposition out of the country to Afghanistan. Operation Enduring Freedom practically reduced to naught the threats of extremist attacks very real in 1999 and 2000.

The coming pull-out of the international coalition troops from Afghanistan and inevitable bout of civil war that will ensue are causing concern in the Central Asian states: their far from simple social and economic context might raise a high wave of Islamic radicalism.

Second, instability in Afghanistan prevents diversification of foreign economic ties; it makes the construction of southward highways and railways, as well as power lines and gas pipelines, impossible. Afghanistan remains an insurmountable barrier on the trade route between the Central Asian countries and Kazakhstan, on the one hand, and the South Asian and Middle Eastern countries, on the other, and (which is even more important) blocks access to their sea ports.

The counterterrorist operation that began in 2001 failed: the United States is pulling out of the country leaving behind the same "Afghan threat," which is causing the Central Asian states to look to Russia and China as possible guarantors of their security.

KEYWORDS: *Afghanistan, Central Asia and Kazakhstan, the Afghan crisis and the situation in Central Asia, national reconciliation in Tajikistan, Greater Central Asia, the New Silk Road, the New Middle East.*

Introduction

For over twenty years now, the Afghan crisis has been affecting the situation in the Central Asian states; the world and regional powers exploit it (either actively or passively) to achieve their geopolitical and geo-economic aims. The United States accused the Taliban of the 9/11 terrorist acts in New York and Washington to justify its military presence in the region.

It seems that until Russia and China fortify their positions in Afghanistan, they will continue taking advantage of its instability.

Iran is losing no time in setting up a transport infrastructure and exploiting its geographic advantages as much as possible to offer the land-locked states access to its Gulf ports.

So far, everyone studying and analyzing the problem of Afghanistan has been concentrating on security issues; the threat of terror, religious extremism, and illegal drug trafficking have been analyzed in detail. The Afghan and Central Asian policies of the leading powers seeking a stronger grip on the region have received wide coverage, while the activities of the Central Asian countries and

Kazakhstan as independent entities of international politics in different spheres (including Afghanistan and the situation around it) have been neglected far too long. This article hopes to take the first step toward closing the gap.

Diversification of External Ties and the Threats Emanating from Afghanistan

Independence has created a dilemma for the peoples of the Central Asian countries and Kazakhstan: What type of statehood should they create? What type of economic policy should they pursue? What foreign policy priorities should they select: integration into the post-Soviet space with Russia as its core or drawing closer to the Muslim South?

With the Iron Curtain finally gone, the states of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia along the borders of Russia's "soft underbelly" (which, unlike the Western and Far Eastern borders of the Soviet Union, was kept away from international trade contacts in Soviet times) have taken the first steps to draw closer together.

The first contacts date back to pre-independence times: in July 1991, President of the Kazakh S.S.R. Nursultan Nazarbaev visited China; later in the same year a delegation of the republic's top officials visited Turkey.

In August 1991, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov paid an official visit to India; in December, a Turkish-Uzbek summit was held in Ankara.

First president of independent Tajikistan Rakhmon Nabiev's visit to Finland (where he signed the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe on 25-27 February, 1992) was followed by visits to Iran (on 28-30 June, 1992), Pakistan (30 June-2 July, 1992), and Afghanistan (14-15 July, 1992).¹

As Chairman of the Council of Ministers and later First Secretary of the C.C. Communist Party of Tajikistan, Rakhmon Nabiev started building the Rogun Hydropower Station, a facility of immense strategic importance for the country and the region. During a visit to Pakistan, the country's leaders offered him a loan of \$500 million (enough to complete the project) on easy terms to be repaid in electric power supplies.²

Two months after the CIS was formed, Ashgabad hosted a discussion of ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization founded jointly by Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey) membership for all the Central Asian states. At a special conference of the ECO Council of Ministers held in Islamabad on 28-29 November, an official membership document was signed with the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Afghanistan. In October 1992, the leaders of the five Turkic-speaking countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan) signed the Ankara Declaration, which some observers describe as a Turkic Common Market.

In October 1993, the ECO ministers of transport, fully aware that the ECO members needed a transportation network to connect them with each other and the rest of the world, met in Almaty to discuss and adopt the Basic Plan for Development of the Transportation Sector. This document is better described as a list of priority projects and work to be done by the member states at the national, bilat-

¹ See: Z. Saidov, *Mezhgosudarstvennyie otnosheniia Respubliki Tadzhikistan v period stanovleniia ee vneshney politiki*, Dushanbe, 2012, p. 17.

² See: M. Safarov, "Rakhmon Nabiev: zagadochnaia smert prezidenta," *Vecherka*, 24 April, 2012.

eral, and regional levels. At the Fourth Summit, which took place in May 1996, memorandums were signed on building roads and oil and gas pipelines leading to the ports of Karachi and Gwadar.

There were at least two factors that interfered with the further development of regional economic cooperation.

- First, there were no conditions conducive to closer political and economic contacts.
- Second, there were more tempting alternatives around.

Vyacheslav Belokrinitskiy³ believes that for a long time the conflict in Afghanistan forced the region's countries to look for political and economic partners elsewhere; the very real security threats created by the Afghan developments led to the Collective Security Treaty signed in Tashkent in May 1992.

The leaders of Tajikistan made no secret of the fact that the armed Tajik opposition was based in Afghanistan. Speaking at the 48th U.N. GA in 1993, President Rakhmon pointed out that the fighters, "having moved from Tajikistan to Afghanistan with the help of extremist groups and international terrorists, are planning to use violence to change the state order in our country."⁴ The Islamic core of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) used Afghan territory as a foothold and an army of 6 thousand mojahideen to build an Islamic state in Tajikistan.⁵

Tajikistan badly needed transportation, energy, and gas corridors across Afghanistan and Iran; it had to complete the Rogun Hydropower Station to start exporting electric power to Pakistan and to withdraw from its transportation impasse. Uzbekistan needed access to the southern ports to move its cotton to the world markets. Turkmenistan needed a gas pipeline across Afghanistan to sell its gas to Pakistan and enliven its trade with its southern neighbors.

A railway mainline of 800 km across the western valleys of Afghanistan was also contemplated.

Pakistan was very interested in wider transportation connections with Central Asia: in February 1993, at a meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers in Quetta, he proposed a plan for an integrated communication system among the ECO member states to be completed by the end of the century.⁶

It was generally acknowledged that the threat of radical Islam, of which Afghanistan was the source, would not allow the Central Asian countries to participate in international cooperation through the southern seas and that this threat would keep them within Russia's orbit much more effectively than economic instruments. Mindful of the threat from the south, these countries would never dare to sever their economic and political ties with Moscow. In November 2000, A. Reutov wrote that "Moscow is not overjoyed by the initiative of the Central Asian republics to recognize the Taliban."⁷

Islamic Radicalism Threatens the Secular Nature of the Region's States

The question of a secular/theocratic future was especially acute in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where religious movements with a much sharper political edge insisted on a state ruled by the Shari'a.

³ See: V. Belokrinitskiy, "Problemy i perspektivy formirovaniia Tsentralnoaziatskogo makroregiona", *Vostok*, No. 4, 1993, p. 43.

⁴ E. Rakhmonov, *Tysiacha let v odnu zhizn* (collection of speeches, interviews, and articles), Irfon, Dushanbe, 2003, p. 9.

⁵ See: A. Seifert, A. Kreikemeyer, *O sovместimosti politicheskogo islama i bezopasnosti v prostranstve OBSE (On the Compatibility of Political Islam and Security in the OSCE Space)*, Sharqi Ozod, Dushanbe, 2003, p. 10.

⁶ See: V. Moskalenko, "Pakistan—kurs na Tsentralnuiu Aziyu," *Vostok*, No. 5, 1996, p. 83.

⁷ A. Reutov, "Kazakhstan bolshe ne boitsia talibov," *Kommersant*, No. 221, 24 November, 2000, available at [www.kommersant.ru/doc/164129].

According to E. Rakhmatullaev, the conflict in Afghanistan, which had been unfolding for many years, was one of the extremely destabilizing factors. As distinct from traditional Islam, Islamism supported by extra-regional centers of radicalism (including those in Afghanistan) was the region's new political phenomenon.⁸

Confronted with the Islamist threat and watching the negative developments in Tajikistan, President of Uzbekistan Karimov concluded that to avoid chaos Tajik-style, the country needed a strong authoritarian government.

In his book, *Uzbekistan na poroge XXI veka* (Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century) published in 1997, he identified the main trends of the country's domestic and foreign policies and pointed out: "We want religion to continue fulfilling its mission of bringing the highest spiritual, moral, and ethical values into people's lives, but we will never allow religious slogans to be hoisted as a banner of the power struggle or to be used to interfere in politics, the economy, or jurisprudence, because in this way they may endanger the state's security and stability."⁹

In his article, "An Incongruous War in the Valley of Poison," Orozbek Moldaliev provided an absolutely correct explanation of why Islamic fighters stepped up their terrorist activities in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan¹⁰: these tactics had already justified themselves in Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

By that time, the Taliban, an ultra-conservative movement, had spread its control far and wide in Afghanistan and established the harshest variant of the Shari'a. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognized the Taliban government; at one point, Uzbekistan was ready to follow their example.¹¹

Turkmenistan, which de facto recognized the Taliban as the country's official government, allowed it to open its mission in Ashgabad and set up its own missions in Herat and Hairatan in Afghanistan.¹²

According to *Kommersant*, the ambassador of Kazakhstan to Pakistan met the Taliban representative for Pakistan in Islamabad; President of Kazakhstan Nazarbaev spoke about the movement as one of the key political and military forces to which his country was prepared to talk.¹³

In the summer of 1999, the Taliban spared no diplomatic efforts to achieve U.N. recognition of their government, a counter-balance to the Northern Alliance of Rabbani.¹⁴

The armed units of the United Tajik Opposition built on the Islamic Renaissance Party were based in Afghanistan; it was recognized by President of Tajikistan Rakhmon, who gave it several seats in the government. The referendum of 26 September, 1999 amended the Constitution, in particular the articles that lifted the ban on political parties based on religions.

This was a compromise for the sake of national reconciliation and the country's peaceful future. Abdulmajid Dostiev, Deputy Chairman of the National Reconciliation Commission,¹⁵ believes that the amendments contradicted Art 1 of the Constitution, which along with other articles of Chapter 1 describes Tajikistan as a secular state. Moreover, under Art 8, all religious organizations are separate from the state.

⁸ See: E. Rakhmatullaev, *Preventivnaia diplomatiia: panatseia ili mirazh*, A monograph, Moscow, 2007, pp. 266-267.

⁹ I. Karimov, *Uzbekistan na poroge XXI veka. Ugrozy bezopasnosti, uslovnia i garantii progressa*, Tashkent, 1997, pp. 43-44.

¹⁰ See: O. Moldaliev, "An Incongruous War in the Valley of Poison," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1, 2000, p. 11-20.

¹¹ [www.polit.ru/news/2000/10/16/553516].

¹² [www.history-x.ru/04/006/030/007.htm].

¹³ See: *Kommersant*, No. 221, 24 November 2000.

¹⁴ [www.pravda.ru/politics/03.11.2000/801158-0/].

¹⁵ See: A.S. Dostiev, *Konstitutsiia Respubliki Tajikistan 1994: istoriia razrabotki, priniatiia, vneseniia izmeneniy i osnovnyie polozhenia*, Matlubot, Dushanbe, 2001, p. 49.

He further writes: “At the same time, the experience of Tajikistan, which has just started moving toward a law-governed state, demonstrated that a country torn apart by civil war, in which the warring sides are prepared to stop it for the sake of the supreme interests of the nation and the state, should use all available means, including the Constitution, to achieve a compromise. Balanced political decisions conducive to social stabilization, even if they contradict some of the legal norms, should be adopted to avert self-destruction.

“In Tajikistan the warring sides, which disagreed on a wide range of problems, agreed that the Constitution and the laws should be amended up to and including inordinate legal norms for the sake of the nation’s unity in order to rule out the very possibility of a civil war in future.

“While rejecting the use of military force to deal with the problems, both sides were fully aware that the new legal norms suggested by the political context and the highest interests of the people and the state were enforced and, therefore, temporary in the historical perspective. They will be replaced with correct legal norms in full conformity with the Fundamental Law when sustainable peace and stability have been achieved and when the culture of a political dialog between different social forces has developed.”¹⁶

Under the Protocol on Guaranteeing Implementation of the Common Agreement on Peace and National Reconciliation in Tajikistan, a representative of UTO was appointed the Commission’s head. The opposition acquired 30% of the seats in the executive (including law and order) structures and 25% of the seats in the Central Election Commission.¹⁷

Having achieved reconciliation, the Islamists sought the maximum political advantages at the coming presidential and parliamentary elections. This was the first stone in the future edifice of an Islamic state, the final aim of the Islamic opposition. Back in 1990, Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda made no secret of the fact that an Islamic state was his and his cronies’ final aim and specified that “this was a strategic aim rather than an immediate task.”¹⁸

In the long-term perspective, the stage-by-stage strategy of moderate Islam to “strengthen its position in the state system” and “widen its ideological and political impact on the country’s social life”¹⁹ presents the gravest danger to secular states with predominantly Muslim populations. Here I have in mind the attempt to achieve an “undemocratic aim” through democratic means, “converting the majority to its ideology and planting in their minds the idea that an ‘Islamic state’ is desired and needed,” while gradually seizing political power by abolishing the secular state through “democratic choice.”²⁰

For instance, the attempted assassination of President of Egypt Anwar Sadat on 6 October, 1981 triggered anti-extremist measures; some of the structures of political Islam, which lost a great number of its members, discontinued the armed struggle and switched to propaganda.

It should be said that because of its demonstrative skin-deep moderate nature, the Muslim Brotherhood stands apart from many other Islamic organizations. In 2006, its leaders, along with 88 deputies in the Egyptian parliament, insisted that they merely wanted “to promote reforms through enlightenment and education of the nation.” They skillfully tapped political liberalization initiated from above to carry out propaganda and agitation and gradually come to power.²¹ On 30 June, 2012, that is, six years later, one of its leaders, Mohamed Morsi, was elected fifth president of Egypt; in

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 49-50.

¹⁷ See: A. Amirbek, *Rol Islamskoy Respubliki Iran v ustanovlenii mira v Tadjikistane*, Dushanbe, 2004, p. 230.

¹⁸ A. Seifert, A. Kreikemeyer, op. cit., p. 100.

¹⁹ A. Niyazi, “Vozrozhdenie Islama v Tadjikistane: traditsiia i politika,” *Tsentralnaia Azia i Kavkaz*, No. 5, 1999, p. 163.

²⁰ W. Schneider-Deters, “Svetskoe gosudarstvo i probuzhdenie islama v postsovetskoy Tsentralnoy Azii (nekotorye politicheskie vyvody,” in: *Islam i svetskoe gosudarstvo*, ed. by Z.I. Manavvarov, W. Schneider-Deters, Tashkent, 2003, p. 124.

²¹ See: Sh. Yevkochev, “O vliianii radikalnykh islamskikh organizatsiy i dvizheniy Egipta na sotsialno-politicheskuu situatsiiu v strane,” *Vostok*, No. 6, 2007, pp. 116-124.

December 2012, the nation approved the Constitution at a referendum, Art 2 of which says: "The principles of Islamic law (Shari'a) form the main source of legislation."

The same variant, up to and including the use of arms and terror, was envisaged for Uzbekistan to force Tashkent recognize the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) as the official opposition and enter into negotiations with it.

The Tajik variant served the pattern: first a commission on national reconciliation; corresponding amendments and addenda to the Constitution of Uzbekistan and a quota in the government and structures of state power at all levels. These and certain other aims were behind the massive move, in June 1999, of IMU units to practically inaccessible areas in eastern Tajikistan, the Karategin zone, controlled by the Tajik opposition to set up transfer bases and training camps there.

This was a logical continuation of the political situation in Tajikistan created by the implementation of the Common Agreement on Peace and National Reconciliation, according to which the government and UTO signed a protocol on the disbandment and disarmament of the armed units of the opposition and on lifting the ban on the opposition parties and their media. This was done on 17 June, 1999; several months later, in August, the Supreme Court of Tajikistan lifted the ban on the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan.

According to Orozbek Moldaliev, contrary to a more or less widespread opinion, the Islamists planned and undertook an invasion not to launch large-scale hostilities against Uzbekistan; they acted according to the "capture of power strategy" in full accordance with the ideology of Islamic extremism, which relied on terror, acts of subversion, and guerilla warfare.

The outcome is easy to imagine: sooner or later the people would be displeased with the government, which by that time would have been drawn into steadily mounting violence, while the Islamists' chances of being recognized as one of the sides at the talks would have increased. The conflict would have spread far and wide across the region to transform it into "another Afghanistan."²²

When plunging into this adventure, the Islamic radicals expected that international terrorist structures camping in Afghanistan would join them; this was amply testified by the fact that the routed units retreated from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to Afghanistan. The government of Tajikistan, acting under the political pressure of Uzbekistan, and the UTO leaders allowed the fighters to seek refuge in Afghanistan.

They did this because the UTO cherished its newly gained status in Tajikistan, while President Rakhmon, in turn, wanted to preserve the fragile peace and still vulnerable national reconciliation.²³

Having assessed the situation and its impact on the political processes inside the country President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov was resolved not to give the extremists even the slightest chance to gain legitimacy or to justify the presence of their bases in Central Asia. The president found it hard to agree with what the Western research centers wrote about the Tajik developments: "The peace process in Tajikistan was the starting point for an unprecedented investigation of the possibility of a compromise between the Islamist and secularist forces. The first compromise in Central Asia concluded between the Islamists and their allies and the secular government camp ended the five-year-long civil war."²⁴

President of Uzbekistan opted for a different course: on 26 and 29 August, 1999, Uzbek aviation bombed what was believed to be the IMU military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.²⁵ The follow-

²² O. Moldaliev, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

²³ See: S. Komolov, *Granitsa. K istorii stanovleniia granitsy Respubliki Tadjikistan*, Dushanbe, 2007, pp. 149-160. I learned from confidential talks with officers of the special services that the defense and security structures of the Republic of Tajikistan helped Jummah Namangani cross Tajikistan and reach Afghanistan via the Lower Panj river port.

²⁴ A. Seifert, A. Kreikemeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁵ See: N. Omuraliev, A. Elebaeva, "Batkenskiesobytiia v Kyrgyzstane," *Tsentralnaia Azia i Kavkaz*, No. 1, 2000, pp. 27-28.

ing year, armed units of the Islamic opposition that invaded the Surkhandarya Region of Uzbekistan and even appeared 80 km away from Tashkent were also liquidated.

In August 2000, Uzbekistan unilaterally laid landmines along its border with Tajikistan at the most likely places of Islamic terrorist attacks. Mines were laid “during the active phase of the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992-1996”²⁶ and in the summer and fall of 1999. Today, 54 stretches of the border in the Khotlon and Sogd Regions and Tursunzade District remain mined. Since 1992, 368 people have been blown up in Tajikistan by mines and over 450 wounded.²⁷ Uzbekistan refuses to remove the mines or at least transfer the maps of the mine-fields to Tajikistan.

President Karimov resolutely refused to open peace talks with IMU leader Tohir Yoldosh. On 29 August, 2000, speaking at the ceremonial opening of a stretch of the Tashkent-Osh highway at the strategically important Kamchik Pass,²⁸ he said: “Terrorists who refuse to lay down arms should be liquidated together with those who help them.”

In this way, the President of Uzbekistan answered UTO leader Said Abdullo Nuri, who mentioned the possibility of talks between Tashkent and the IMU leaders. Karimov was infuriated: “Nuri is nothing but a puppet of certain centers of radical extremism situated outside Tajikistan.”²⁹

This means that the political situation described above was shaped by the Batken events, 9/11, and the beginning of the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan (that is, the Afghan factor). According to Arne C. Seifert, Tajikistan has been gradually shifting to a harsher position when dealing with Islamists. During the peace talks, those who preferred a more determined stand and defended secular ideas objected to compromises with the Islamists. They were convinced that the antiterrorist strategy, American military bases, and removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan had created a favorable context for an offensive against the Islamists. They did not exclude even those Islamists who had received official posts under the national reconciliation agreement. This added tension to the far from simple relations between the secular state and the Islamists.³⁰

Rafik Sayfulin has offered an interesting opinion about the political situation in Uzbekistan and the key factors behind it.

- First, Uzbekistan, and the rest of the post-Soviet space for that matter, had no political traditions of democratic values, regulations, and principles.
- Second, in Uzbekistan the national traditions and national mentality were either part of the religious attitudes or contradicted them.
- Third, for obvious reasons Uzbekistan has been affected by the conflict in Afghanistan and the civil war in Tajikistan. No transport projects to provide the Central Asian countries with access to sea ports were possible because of continued instability in Afghanistan. Until the situation in Afghanistan is normalized, no mutual understanding and efficient mechanisms needed to resolve the regional tasks (economic, hydropower, transport, communication, and ecological) of vital importance can be reached, while their future might become even more vague.
- Fourth, today the Islamic factor figures prominently in Uzbekistan; religion has moved to the fore in independent Uzbekistan, which has enhanced the social role of Islam; this pro-

²⁶ From a letter of the prime minister of Uzbekistan to the prime minister of Tajikistan, 4 April, 2012, available at [www.alaqoda.com 04.04.2012].

²⁷ [www.kyrtag.rg], 5 October, 2012.

²⁸ The road across the Kamchik Pass connects the Ferghana valley with Tashkent and the rest of the country, around the Sogd Region of Tajikistan. Early in August 2000, one of the Islamist units tried to block it (see: [www.newsru.ru]).

²⁹ S. Amin, “Ispytanie na prochnost: Batken 1999-2000 gg.,” available at [www.easttime.ru].

³⁰ See: A.C. Seifert, “O polze ukrepleniia doveriia mezhdou islamistami i sekularistami,” in: *Postroenie doveriia mezhdou islamistami i sekularistami—tadzhikskiy eksperiment*, Dushanbe, 2004, p. 25.

cess has been accompanied by greater national self-awareness and more obvious ethnic self-identity.

In fact, Uzbekistan has to choose between two mutually exclusive options. On the one hand, the country's leaders demonstrate their desire to preserve and develop the traditional Islamic values within a secular state. On the other, there are forces that would prefer the Islamic factor as the dominant one in the country's social and political context. Political forces do not hesitate to abuse Islamic values in their struggle for people's minds; the forces that strive for power hoist Islam as their banner.³¹

The Afghan Crisis as an Obstacle to Regional Economic Development

The international conference on Afghanistan Good-Neighborly Relations convened in Kabul on 22 December, 2002 shows that the new leaders of Afghanistan wanted to establish constructive relations with all their neighbors. It attracted the representatives of six other countries, who adopted a Declaration on the Good-Neighborly Relations under which the neighboring states pledged to promote closer trade, transit, and investment cooperation with Afghanistan.³²

In 2004-2005, the situation in Afghanistan more or less stabilized to the extent that the country's leaders started thinking of closer regional economic cooperation (RECCA) in the form of annual conferences. The armed conflict, which showed no signs of abating, however, did nothing for the mutually advantageous economic cooperation planned.

After gaining their independence, the Central Asian republics started looking for new economic partners abroad, but according to I. Azovskiy, a research fellow at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, this proved next to impossible because of the absence of transportation routes in the southern and eastern directions (Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and China).³³

Evgeniy Denisov, another Russian academic, offered a highly interesting opinion about the initiatives of the key geopolitical players—Greater Central Asia, the New Silk Road, the New Middle East, and Central Eurasia; he has written, in particular, that in “Central Asia the struggle among the external forces has developed into rivaling integration projects supported by extra-regional actors. Transport routes, particularly pipelines, and their directions became an important element of this rivalry... Pro-Russian ideologies have their weak points, mainly because they want to tie the region to a space that has not yet recovered from the crisis caused by the Soviet Union's disintegration. This causes the ruling Central Asian elites to feel disappointed with Russia.”³⁴

The contention among the geopolitical ideas around Central Asia and Kazakhstan forces these countries to justify to the public at home and abroad their decisions, official statements, and actions related, among other things, to their agreement/disagreement to allow foreign military bases in their territories.

³¹ See: R. Sayfulin, “Respublika Uzbekistan: politicheskaya dinamika,” in: *Tsentralnaya Azia: Sobstvenny vzgliad*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Berlin, 2006, pp. 386-387.

³² See: RIA Novosti, 22 December, 2002.

³³ See: I. Azovskiy, “Shelkovy put nakanune XXI veka,” available at [www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-03-1999/st_06_azovski.shtml].

³⁴ E.A. Denisov, “Tsentralnaya Azia kak region mezhdunarodnoy politiki,” *Vostok (Oriens)*, No. 2, 2012, pp. 74, 78.

The terrorist attack of 9/11, of which Washington was warned in advance,³⁵ was used to start a counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan. Back in 2000 and 2001, the Americans, determined to liquidate al-Qa'eda bases, had been contemplating an armed invasion of Afghanistan, moving from Central Asia among other places³⁶ and relying on the Northern Alliance. At that time, they pinned their hopes on Ahmad Shah Massoud, leader of the Northern Alliance³⁷; this is indirectly confirmed by his week-long European tour in April 2001; on 9 September, 2001, he was assassinated by an Arab terrorist. President of the European Parliament Nicole Fontaine invited him to Paris and Strasbourg "as political recognition of the fact that he represented the force that stands opposed to the Taliban;" the Western press wrote of him as a "symbol of national unity of Afghanistan."³⁸

Ahmad Shah Massoud received military-technical support from Russia and Iran across the territory of Tajikistan³⁹ and expected that the West would also help him. Patrick Martin, who has looked behind the shroud of secrecy that covers everything connected with 9/11, has written that the Bush Administration used the catastrophe of the World Trade Center as a chance to station American troops in Central Asia and the Caspian Basin, a region with rich and untapped oil reserves that experts described as the Persian Gulf of the twenty-first century.⁴⁰

It seems that the region's energy riches were not the only and not the main temptation or reason why the Americans exploited 9/11 to achieve their geopolitical aims. By that time, everyone knew that Western companies had already gained access to the Caspian oil reserves (a mere 2% to 5% of the world's total).⁴¹ By that time, it had been decided in principle to build the BTC oil pipeline.

As soon as the Soviet Union became history, the West consistently worked toward achieving consolidated statehoods of the Soviet successor-states, their complete independence, and the greatest possible distance between them and Russia. It consistently initiated all sorts of programs, including the Program of Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) initiated in 1991; Partnership for Peace launched by NATO in 1994; Centrasbat appeared in 1997; the Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe program (INOGATE) started in 1994; Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) started in 1998; the BTC oil pipeline, a project dated to 1994, which moved the first oil in July 2006; as well as the association of states (GUUAM started in 1997) along Russia's southern borders. In March 1999, U.S. Congress passed the Silk Road Strategy Act geared at strengthening the Central Asian states' economic and political independence.

Despite the efforts to detach Central Asia from Russia, regional cooperation structures with good prospects were being formed; the process went on because American and European aid to the newly independent countries was mainly technical and fairly limited; Western experts never denied this.

The EurAsEC treaty was signed in Astana in 2000 as the agreement on the Antiterrorist Center of the CIS Member-States; the Commonwealth was working on the Collective Rapid Deployment Force in Central Asia.⁴²

³⁵ See: P. Martin, Was the US Government Alerted to September 11 Attack? available at [<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2002/01/sept-j16.html>].

³⁶ See: Ibidem.

³⁷ See: V. Panfilova, "Zapad vnov vspomnil o 'modjahede nomer odin,'" *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 18 April, 2001.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ See: S. Akimbekov, *Afghanskiy uzel i problemy bezopasnosti Tsentralnoy Azii*, Almaty, 2003.

⁴⁰ See: P. Martin, "U.S. Planned War in Afghanistan Long before September 11," available at [<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2001/11/afgh-n20.html>].

⁴¹ See: V. Belokrinitsky, "Kakie korrektyvny nuzhny vneshney politike Rossii?" *Vostok*, No. 3, 2003, p. 114.

⁴² The Collective Security Council passed the decision on the Collective Rapid Deployment Force in Yerevan on 25 May, 2001; it was about 1,500-strong with regular armaments and military equipment and personnel selected from the armed forces of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.

In June 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was set up with Uzbekistan as a full member.⁴³ The setting up of the SCO served as evidence of Russia's and China's increased influence in the region. The sides signed the Shanghai Convention on the Struggle against Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism and started working on an antiterrorist structure within the SCO. The Collective Security Treaty signed on 14 May, 2002 was being transformed into a full-fledged structure; the Batken events of 1999 and 2000 added urgency to these plans.

The armed conflict in Afghanistan, which went on unabated, raised the steadily mounting threat of radical political Islam in the Central Asian countries, which forced them to seek Russia's military-technical assistance.

The gas pipeline project between Turkmenistan and Pakistan via Afghanistan flopped when American Unocal left it in 1998. Early in 2000, Ashgabad agreed to move its gas across Russia along the old route, which spelled the end of its involvement in the Transcaspian gas pipeline project designed to bring gas to the Turkish borders.

Very much worried about religious fanaticism, extremism, and terrorism, Kazakhstan invited an inter-confessional forum to start a multi-sided dialog and pass collective decisions designed to defuse tension in the region and the world. Kazakhstan, home of 140 ethnicities and 40 confessions, saw inter-cultural and inter-confessional tolerance as one of its priorities.⁴⁴ In 2003, President Nazarbaev published his *Kriticheskoe desiatiletie* (The Critical Decade),⁴⁵ in which he examined the phenomena of Islamic extremism and terrorism, political radicalism, and other non-traditional threats that came to the fore in the era of globalization and outlined a wide program of preventive measures and effective methods of struggle. The new rendition of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Political Parties bans ethnic and religious parties.

The United States, which in 2001 launched a counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan, tried to cardinally change the political and economic situation in Central Asia, stabilize Afghanistan, and give the Central Asian countries and Kazakhstan access to the Indian Ocean. Washington was determined to liquidate the "Afghan threat" that pushed the region's countries toward Russia and China.

The smooth beginning of the counterterrorist operation, the new Constitution, presidential elections, and the new Cabinet looked promising: Afghanistan could have become an equal partner in regional economic cooperation. The Declaration of the SCO summit of 5 July, 2005 in Astana indirectly confirmed the fairly widespread opinion that the situation in Afghanistan was improving: "Today, we note the positive trend towards stabilization of the internal political situation in Afghanistan... In the light of completion of the active military phase of the counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan, the SCO member-states believe that the participants in the anti-terrorism coalition should establish end dates for their temporary use of the aforementioned infrastructure facilities and the presence of their military contingents in the territories of the SCO countries."⁴⁶

Richard Boucher, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, asserted in a written testimony to a Congress committee of 26 April, 2006: "The opening of Afghanistan has transformed it from an obstacle separating Central from South Asia into a bridge connecting the two. And this, in turn, opens exciting new possibilities."⁴⁷ He further wrote that the United States, Russia

⁴³ In January 2001, the Republic of Uzbekistan expressed its readiness to take part in the Shanghai Five as one of its full members; in 2000, President Karimov attended the Dushanbe summit as an observer.

⁴⁴ The First Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions took place in Astana on 23-24 September, 2003; the second on 12-13 September, 2006; third on 1-2 June, 2009; and fourth on 30-31 May, 2012.

⁴⁵ See: N. Nazarbaev, *Kriticheskoe desiatiletie*, Atamura, Almaty, 2003, 240 pp.

⁴⁶ [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=1120666800>].

⁴⁷ [<http://www.great-quotes.com/quote/787042>].

and China were not rivals. What America was doing can be described as giving the region's countries a chance to choose ... and to prevent a situation in which they would be locked between two great powers—Russia and China.⁴⁸

On 28-29 August, 2003, Almaty hosted the first International Ministerial Conference of Land-locked and Transit Developing Countries, which adopted the Almaty Program of Action.

On 1 June, 2004, the United States and the Central Asian countries signed Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA), which gave a hope to widen their trade and economic cooperation and attract more investments. Afghanistan attended the TIFA annual conference as an observer. On 18 October, 2012, the sides met in Astana to discuss, among other things, trade and transit issues in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Conferences on regional and economic cooperation with Afghanistan have become a regular feature since 2005.

On 7 October, 2009, speaking at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, William J. Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, said: “A stable future for Afghanistan depends on the continued assistance of our Central Asian partners—just as a stable future for Central Asia depends upon success against violent extremists in Afghanistan. The energy resources of Central Asia can be a force for predictability in the global economy, ensuring diversity of sources and markets and transit routes, while at the same time bringing a new sense of economic possibility in the region itself.”⁴⁹

This means that the United States is consistently elbowing Russia and China out of Central Asia. Washington seems to be resolved to grant Afghanistan a dubious honor to become in the near future a transit corridor for energy and other resources with the Central Asian States and Kazakhstan shouldering the related expenses.⁵⁰

The future of Afghanistan as seen today defies even the most cautious optimism; it is still blocking all trade contacts between Central and South Asia and the Middle East, to say nothing of the Central Asian states' coveted aim, access to the sea. According to Victor Korgun, it is too early to speak about Afghanistan's regional integration; it is too weak economically and politically, its government is too shaky, while its international status as a dependent country is too low to give it an equal status in the ECO, SCO, CSTO, and OIC—so far, it remains on their economic and political margins.⁵¹

Conclusions

Armed confrontation in Afghanistan affected the economic and political situation in Central Asia in two different ways.

- First, the way the situation in Afghanistan is unfolding has created a real threat to the state order of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In the former, the frantic efforts of the U.N. and some of the regional countries have integrated the opposition into the process of peaceful development. The strength of the Uzbek opposition, which fought in Afghanistan together with the Taliban, has been greatly undermined by the counterterrorist operation of the international

⁴⁸ See: V. Plastun, “Integratsia v Tsentralnoy Azii i vliianie vneshnikh faktorov,” in: *Proekty sotrudnichestva i integratsii dlia Tsentralnoy Azii: sravnitelny analiz, vozmozhnosti i perspektivy, materialy mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii*, Bishkek, 2007, p. 60.

⁴⁹ [<http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2009a/130389.htm>].

⁵⁰ See: G. Tulepbergenova, “The Greater Central Asia Project: Present State and Evolution,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (55), 2009, pp. 74-85.

⁵¹ See: V. Korgun, “Afghanistan i problemy integratsii Tsentralnoy Azii,” in: *Proekty sotrudnichestva i integratsii dlia Tsentralnoy Azii*, p. 227.

coalition. In Tajikistan, a compromise was achieved by amending the Constitution in a very unusual way by including certain politically motivated legal regulations in it; this integrated political Islam into the political system of a state with a predominantly Muslim population and gave it the opportunity to come to power through “democratic choice”—this has already happened in Egypt.

The leaders of Uzbekistan, who refused to talk to the armed opposition and who instead squeezed it out of the country, profited from Operation Enduring Freedom: this eliminated the threat of attacks by religious extremists (very frequent in 1999 and 2000). The contemplated pull-out of the international coalition troops from Afghanistan and another bout of civil war in this country might prove to be even more dangerous for the Central Asian states: their shaky economies and the far from simple social context may cause outbursts of Islamic radicalism.

- Second, Afghan instability deprives the Central Asian countries of the chance to diversify their foreign economic ties and reach the southern seas by building highways, railways, power lines, and gas pipelines. Operation Enduring Freedom failed, together with the U.S.’s plans to neutralize the Afghan threat, which pushes Central Asia and Kazakhstan toward Russia and China. The counterterrorist coalition will pull out leaving Afghanistan to continue playing its role as an obstacle to trade contacts between the Central Asian countries and Kazakhstan and the sea ports of South Asia and the Middle East.