

AFGHANISTAN 2014: UNCERTAINTY AND RISKS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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A B S T R A C T

The continuing destabilization of public life in Afghanistan and far from always successful attempts by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)¹ to return it to normal are creating fundamental challenges and threats to regional and global security.

The following problems can be identified:

1. Higher drug production and circulation. This is causing a steady rise in both the number of people dependent on heroin and opiates coming from Afghanistan and the total number of drug addicts (according to experts, 36,000 young people die from drugs in Russia every year).
2. Stronger transnational crime groups in Central Asia (CA). Their activity is closely related to the drug business and movement of drugs from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe through the Central Asian countries.
3. Continued presence of armed U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan and its neighboring states in the form of their network of super bas-

es is not helping to combat the threat of terrorism.

In recent years, it has become obvious that the CA states are facing a complex problem manifested in a dramatic deterioration of the internal situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan; an increase in the fragmentary Talibanization factor; similar situations in the border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan; and an aggravation of the Pashtun issue.

The problem is that some of the former ideas about what is going on in Afghanistan do not correspond to current reality. It is incorrect to take the simplified approach and reduce the entire problem to the existence of the Taliban movement, under which all those drawn into the struggle against the ISAF in the wake of various ideas and slogans are lumped. Several Taliban centers function in Afghanistan and Pakistan (radical, extremist, and moderate).

The policy of the CA states should not be limited to endowing the large nations with the right to resolve the Afghan-Pakistani problems. States with interests in the country that are capable of having an impact on the development of the situation must also be engaged to untie the "Afghan knot"; the matter primarily concerns Russia, China, Iran, and the CA countries.

¹ At present, the ISAF comprises armed force units from 50 countries of the world.

KEYWORDS: *Central Asia, Afghanistan, South Asia, regional security, ISAF.*

Introduction

At the beginning of February 2010, a conference was held in London to determine Afghanistan's future, at which the representatives of 35 foreign ministries of different states and Afghan President Hamid Karzai made statements. The heads of the Russian, American, British, French, Chinese, and German foreign ministries expressed their support of the idea to gradually transfer responsibility for the situation in the country to Afghan structures. However, each of the countries has a different understanding of what "responsibility for the situation" means. One thing has become clear—the military campaign can no longer be supported by the previous aims; the changes earmarked in Afghan life have dictated the appearance of new trends.

First Trend

Despite the onset of the gradual pullout of the Western coalition forces from Afghanistan, the Americans still maintain their presence in this country at 3-5 military bases. As the then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said at a conference in London, the United States cannot just leave the country, it must give the regime that remains after 2014 military-technical, economic, and political support. "It's not an exit strategy, it's about assisting the Afghans" in taking responsibility for their own security, she explained. It is important to keep in mind, however, that it could be some Taliban regime that comes to replace Hamid Karzai.² The mentioned assistance also presumes an attempt to deal a significant blow to the radical part of the Taliban by drawing moderate members (one of whom the Americans consider to be mullah Omar) to the Americans' side, including by means of bribery.³

Afghan and Tajik observers⁴ claim that American military units are being withdrawn from the southern and central provinces of Afghanistan. However, three military air bases with a growing combat potential have been determined; they are situated in Shindand, Kandahar, and Bagram.

Second Trend

Attention is drawn to the actions of the Western coalition associated with allowing certain bands of radical Islamists, religious extremists, and polyethnic terrorist groups to reach the north of the country. They are composed not only of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Chechens, but also of

² [<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/01/28/uk.afghanistan/index.html>].

³ According to information widely spread by the media, intensive talks are being held between the Americans and the Taliban members of Mullah Omar.

⁴ Based on information obtained at personal meetings with Aziz Arianfar (Head of the Center for the Study of Afghanistan, Germany) and Professor Abdunabi Sattorzod (Center of Strategic Research under the President of Tajikistan) at the conference on Regional Security in the Context of Afghan Uncertainty, Almaty, 9-10 April, 2012.

Pashtuns; they are gaining a foothold in the country's north—near Imam-Sakhib (the Kunduz Province), Zebake (Badakhshan), several districts in Baglan, Samangan, Fariab, Batgiz, as well as in Herat and Takhor. It should be noted that these areas and districts are not regions of compact Pashtun residence. What is more, these bands have advanced into areas close to the passes of Gorny Badakhshan (Tajikistan).

Third Trend

During the current military campaign, the U.S. leadership has been trying to enlarge the zone of security around Kabul and the military air base of Bagram. According to several experts, this means that regardless of how the situation develops in Afghanistan, the Americans intend to retain their control over the country's government. The Western coalition is essentially closing its eyes to the separatist strivings of certain groups of the Afghan population, primarily the Tajiks operating in the north of the country. According to observers, the Islamists in the province of Badakhshan are the most determined and could possibly draw the Islamists of Tajikistan's Gorny Badakhshan into their games.

Anticipated Consequences

The Tajik political circles are determined to rebuff any attempts to turn Afghanistan into a Pashtun country. Hamid Karzai has drawn up a draft that recognizes the Durand Line as the de facto border; however, he is not releasing it since he is worried about completely losing the Pashtuns' support. The Tajik leaders of the north of Afghanistan are worried about the Tribal Area becoming joined to the Pashtun territories in Afghanistan (if this happens, the number of Pashtuns in the country will double).⁵ The struggle between regional and ethnic groups is intensifying.

Observers are also taking heed of the forthright statement by Governor of the Balkh Province Atta Muhammad Nur regarding his intention to become the president of Afghanistan. They have no doubts that Doctor Abdullah Abdullah will be another surefire candidate, whom even the Governor of Balkh will not object to.

At the moment, Atta Muhammad Nur is the leader of the Tajiks of Afghanistan (ex-president Burhanuddin Rabbani and General Mohammad Daud were killed the year before last); he enjoys much greater prestige than politically passive Yunus Kanuni, Ahmad Zie Masud, and Marshal Fahim. The strong position of the Governor of Balkh, who controls the railroad from Khairaton to Mazar-i-Sharif and access to Uzbekistan in general, is compelling U.S. and NATO representatives to support him.

The forces of the former Northern Alliance could be consolidated around Atta Muhammad Nur and Doctor Abdullah Abdullah, who have managed to retain significant military potential. At the same time, due to the corrupted relations that have developed over the transit deliveries through Khairaton-Termez, Atta Muhammad Nur is supported by the key figures of Uzbekistan, particularly Chairman of the National Security Service of Uzbekistan Rustam Inoiatov.

⁵ See: A. Kniazev, "Razdel Afganistana vyzovet 'effect domino' dlia vsej Srednei Azii," available at [<http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1525282.html#ixzz2XDwJOOWX>], 13 June, 2013.

In turn, the ethnic component in Tajikistan is based on recognizing the authority of the Governor of Balkh. The Tajik press has repeatedly expressed the idea of creating either an independent state (a multiethnic federation under the auspices of the Tajiks), or a broad autonomy with its center in Mazar-i-Sharif with minimum ties with the government in Kabul.

Informed observers think that if an autonomy is established, Governor of Balkh Atta Muhammad Nur will continue to be the key figure in it. However, if the scenario that envisages establishing the independence of North Afghanistan takes the upper hand, Abdullah Abdullah may be promoted to the main political role, whose international renown and authority among the Tajiks of other regions of the country (as well as abroad) is much higher than Atta Muhammad Nur's, whereby the latter may become prime minister. Moreover, U.S. political circles, which have long maintained ties with Abdullah Abdullah, think that this politician's policy is more predictable.

Another separatist project was voiced by leader of the Afghan National Congress Party Abdul Latif Pedram⁶ (deputy from the Badakhshan Province). At the peak of the conflict in Gorny Badakhshan (July 2012), he said that the Americans and British were planning to unite the Pakistani regions of Gilgit and Chitral, as well as the Afghan and Tajik parts of Badakhshan, with the aim of forming a new state with a predominant Ismailite population. It should be noted that this federalist idea was supported earlier (in 2003) during discussion of the new constitution. It was also supported by General Abdul Rashid Dostum and Turan Muhammad Ismail-khan.

The Uzbek factor has become an important element of the U.S. separatist scenario. As early as April 2012, General Abdul Rashid Dostum returned from Turkey to Afghanistan, after which there were several "test" combat clashes between Uzbek fighters and the units of the governor of Balkh. They were provoked by attempts to divvy up the spheres of control over several economic facilities. General Dostum took up residence in Shibergan and essentially established control over the local governor and the provinces of Jawzjan and Sari Pul (partially).

The northern Pashtun factor is the most prominent in the entire context of Afghan Tajik and Uzbek activation. The regions where Pashtuns live are bastions for the Taliban and international terrorist groups (as defined by the international coalition forces) associated with them. Both the local Pashtuns and those who come from the south and center of the country are set on countering any attempts to implement separatist or autonomist scenarios. Several of these groups are under the control of the Pakistani special services, as well as of the military, political, and religious circles of this country. They can be sent indirectly through Pakistanis by the Chinese special services, so in Afghanistan they are called the Chinese Taliban.

If attempts are made to establish non-Pashtun autonomies, support of the above-mentioned groups from Pakistan and China could be increased. Pakistan sees them as traditional supporters of Pakistani interests in the regions of Afghanistan. China, in turn, is not interested in the fragmentation of Afghanistan; it is trying to establish the level of stability necessary for implementing its own economic and communication projects.

So an increase in separatist tendencies will only lead to further military opposition on ethnic grounds. This also applies to southern Afghanistan and particularly to those parts of it where there are relatively large enclaves of Tajiks, Hazaras, and other non-Pashtun ethnicities (for example, Balochi).

If Afghanistan becomes fragmented, the non-Pashtun political forces could receive the main American and Western support. It is possible that the Americans will succeed in coming to terms with some of the Taliban groups by giving them control over the southern provinces in exchange for continued U.S. presence in such strategically important places as Shindand, Kandahar, and Bagram. In

⁶ In 2004, Abdul Latif Pedram, as presidential candidate, made the idea of federalizing Afghanistan one of his election campaign platforms.

so doing, the Americans will fully retain (or even increase) their presence in the north of the country (Mazar-i-Sharif).

This kind of scenario might have the side effect of destabilizing the CA republics due to the creation of problem zones in regions of Tajikistan (Pamir and Darvaz-Tavildar) and Kyrgyzstan (Osh and Batken). If this happens, Kazakhstan will most likely be next in line. As for Uzbekistan, its local elite believes⁷ that the republic has been saved from this fate in the mid term by withdrawing its membership from the CSTO.

The growing activity of fighters in northern Afghanistan (particularly in Kunduz and Badakhshan) and the instability observed since June 2012 in Gorny Badakhshan suggest that the spring and fall of 2014 will see an aggravation of the ethnic situation; this will give the Americans an opportunity to support the separatist trends.

A View from Central Asia

The CA countries are particularly concerned about the situation developing in Afghanistan, especially in light of the withdrawal of the international forces in 2014. It is being examined in three contexts—national, regional, and global.

The national context. Afghanistan can be considered a failed state; there are several arguments to back this assertion.

- First, there is proof that 1.3 million votes were falsified at the 2009 elections, which means that the Afghans do not trust the current power system in the country.
- Second, the efficiency of the administrative system leaves much to be desired. There are 25 ministries in the country, while its army amounts to between 300,000 and 400,000 soldiers. However, no significant achievements have been reached in ensuring security, organizing intelligent administration, or acquiring new development prospects.
- Third, the Afghan government does not have enough income to cover spending, which is greatly hindering the country's development and making it dependent on unstable external investments.
- Fourth, the production and dissemination of opiates has never been an Afghan project; it was launched in the 1980s by the CIA, which did not have the funds at the time to finance the mujahideen used in the fight against the Soviet troops. This makes it very difficult for the Afghan people and government to put a halt to growing opium and producing narcotics.
- Fifth, despite the fact that Afghanistan has relatively appreciable mineral resources,⁸ the projects related to their exploitation cannot be implemented in 1-2 years. So there is no point in expecting any revenue from natural resources any time soon; at present, 36% of the Afghan population is still living below the poverty level.⁹

The regional context. Pakistan is playing an active role in the Afghan situation. A total of 20,000 madrasahs have been built in the north of Waziristan, which form a support base for the organized armed groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

⁷ For more details, see: "The Taliban will not Look for New Targets in Central Asia after Withdrawal of NATO Forces from Afghanistan," available in Russian at [<http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/22465.html>], 13 June, 2013.

⁸ See, for example: J. Risen, "U.S. Identifies Vast Mineral Riches in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 13 June, 2010, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/14/world/asia/14minerals.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0], 13 June, 2013.

⁹ See: "Afghanistan," available at [<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>], 13 June, 2013.

There is the opinion in Afghanistan that the war in the country is fortifying and strengthening the Taliban and over time it will become a threat to India, the east of China, and CA, whereby there are already several radical groups in the latter. Next on the Taliban's list is Russia, which could be made vulnerable by the establishment of ties between Pakistani and Afghan radical Islamists and Chechnia.

Russia could establish strategic cooperation with Pakistan, Iran, and China, which, in particular, will make it possible to discuss with Pakistan the possibility of taking steps to put a halt to the support of radical movements. This will be much easier than reinforcing the borders of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan to prevent the penetration of radical groups into the region.

The global aspect.

- First, the world media is painting an unambiguously negative picture of Afghanistan.
- Second, there are 54 ethnic groups living in Afghanistan that speak 53 languages and represent different cultures. It would be incorrect to say that the Central Asian states are showing a heightened interest in establishing close ties with the Uzbeks and Tajiks living in Afghanistan. Here it would be appropriate to recall that Pakistan has already attempted to promote the idea of establishing a Greater Afghanistan (Pashtun), but it proved unfeasible; the same can be said of the concept of a Greater Khorasan. These models are unlikely to work in Afghanistan, since they are incommensurable with the country's peaceful life; the example of the Kurd problem in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey can be given as a direct analogue.
- Third, the Central Asian countries must perceive all the citizens of Afghanistan as a united nation, otherwise, it will be impossible to establish long-term cooperation with this country.
- Fourth, it must be kept in mind that the American troops will not be completely withdrawn from Afghanistan.

I would also like to remind you that large deposits of iron, copper, cobalt, and gold have been found in Afghanistan, as well as deposits of several industrial metals, such as lithium needed for producing batteries and niobium used for manufacturing superconductors. The Ainak copper deposit close to Kabul is considered the largest in Eurasia (according to 2006 estimates, its supplies amount to around 240 million tons of ore with a 2.3% copper content), while the Hajigak iron-ore field located in the same place with supplies of around 428 million tons of ore at 62 to 68% content is the largest in the South Asia region.¹⁰ The Pentagon Report for 2010 estimates the cost of the minerals discovered at \$1 trillion; naturally this information cannot leave the main players, particularly China, indifferent.

After Withdrawal of the International Forces: Abstractions Popular in the CA Countries

There is still no conception/strategy for withdrawing the international coalition forces from Afghanistan; there is only a rough outline of the tentative route of departure drawn on the political

¹⁰ See: "Strany islama. Afganistan," available at [<http://www.jam-dc.ru/articles/1021-strany-islama-afganistan.html>], 15 June, 2013.

map. Moreover, there is not even an approximate model of how Afghanistan and CA will look in the future.

Different ideas are in the offing about Afghanistan's future after the withdrawal of the international contingent of troops.

1. Hopes are often expressed that Afghanistan is no longer in the focus of geopolitical attention. The year 2014 is considered a deadline heralding the advent of new development in the region. At the same time, Afghanistan will continue to play a sufficiently important role in the projects being developed in the region. It is thought that control over Afghanistan is an important factor of geopolitics for such world players as the U.S., the leading countries of Europe, China, and Russia.

Russia is not claiming a domineering role in this region today. However, just like China, it is interested in keeping Afghanistan under control. Both Russia and China have had to reconcile themselves to the fact that the U.S. and NATO are playing the main role in this, however, on the other hand, they are sighing with a certain amount of relief. For Russia the Afghan question is largely tied to the problem of drug trafficking and control of CA. China, on the other hand, is more concerned about gaining access to Afghanistan's mineral reserves and limiting export of Uighur separatism from this country's territory.

2. The territory Afghanistan and several of its adjacent countries are located on is at the crossroads of three large regions—CA, South Asia (SA), and the Middle East (which has given rise to the idea of a Greater Central Asia). However, it would help to examine the situation and the region's problem in a broader historical context.

Throughout history, Afghanistan has played an important role in world politics and international relations. It has never disappeared from the major players' sight, being now a dividing, now a unifying element in their common interrelations system. The multi-century ties between Iran and India can also be associated with Afghanistan, as well as the clash of the British and Russian empires and the Soviet Union's struggle with the West.

The growing influence of the leading external players often caused an increase in the centrifugal forces within Afghanistan. This is why the history of the Afghan state is one clash or war after another, which always dealt an enormous blow to the country's sovereignty and independence.

However, we need to keep in mind Afghanistan's exclusive position as a keystone or arch in the security system of CA and SA. A strong and integrated Afghanistan ruled by emirs or kings has always been recognized by all the ethnic groups and tribes and has been a country dividing empires and preventing their clashes. As soon as Afghanistan became dependent on an empire, the entire security system in the region collapsed. So Afghanistan is historically earmarked to be a strong and integrated country; only then can peace be attained in the region.¹¹

3. The Taliban has rallied its ranks due to the presence of an external enemy; the same can be said of the mujahideen, whose active operations unfolded during the years of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan.

However, no matter how high the level of unity of this movement, it will ultimately collapse, since inveterate, unending intertribal and interclan strife will continue to gain momentum. There are around 100 conflicting tribes of Pashtuns living in Afghanistan

¹¹ For more details, see: A.A. Garritskiy, *Istoria Afghanistana*, Dushanbe, 2007, pp. 66-76; "Razdelenie Afghanistana ili sozdanie seti voennykh ob'ektov v Srednei Azii?" available at [<http://www.regnum.ru/news/1630212.html#ixzz2XEJQsdA9>], 15 June, 2013.

alone. When making forecasts about the establishment of a Pashtun state, for instance, it is worth knowing the reasons for tribal rivalry, which of the tribes have kinship relations and which are engaged in blood feuds, and where the roots of potential conflict among them lie. The relations among the nationalities living in northern Afghanistan (Tajiks and Uzbeks) are just as complicated.

Afghanistan has always been a country with a decentralized administration system, even during the time of the emirate (1834-1926) and kingdom (1929-1973). In so doing, quite a strong variegated government existed that relied on group and tribe leaders; Afghanistan was never ideally centralized.

Afghanistan is an important participant in the regional processes going on in South and Central Asia, which include drug trafficking, Islamic resistance (radical groups), and the claims of neighboring states to control over Afghan ethnic territories. The presence of foreign forces has nothing to do with this; all of the above-mentioned facts have become firmly rooted in Afghanistan's public life, and so will continue after 2014 too.

The area in which Pashtun tribes live on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border, as well as the contradictions between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan related to the struggle for control over the north of Afghanistan are being actively used by nations to increase their regional influence. Afghanistan's natural resources (particularly rare earth metals) are also important, as well as the drug trafficking existing in its territory.

Supporters of the idea of global conspiracies are giving Afghanistan a significant role in American foreign policy. It is viewed as a vitally important strategic platform for controlling Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and China, as well as for putting forceful pressure on these countries. The U.S. thinks it important to maintain a military infrastructure in the country, but in reality it is crystal clear that the nature, format, and scope of American-Pakistani cooperation will not be able to resolve this task. The concept of Greater Central Asia has already outlived itself; the region is leaving the orbit of U.S. attention and in the near future interest in it (just as the amount of resources sent there) will drop.

It stands to reason that the U.S. will continue to keep its fingers on the pulse of regional processes, but its influence here will decrease. The U.S. will occupy a very unusual position: as the Chinese say, it will "sit on the hill and watch the tigers fight"—Russia and China. Moreover, it will try to a certain extent to delegate certain problems to both countries, while also helping them to resolve them. The Americans are adhering to the following political scenario: China must be prompted to act against Russian influence in the region, while Russia must be convinced of the necessity of retraining China's penetration into CA.

Conclusions and Forecasts

There is no need to expect a complete withdrawal of the international coalition forces from Afghanistan; this is a long process and the foreign military presence in the country will be retained in the foreseeable future. No cardinal changes in Afghanistan are predicted during this time: a situation similar to the current one will continue.

It is very possible that the withdrawal of the international forces from Afghanistan will significantly change the situation in CA; in particular, there will be an increased threat to the Central Asian regimes from armed groups uncontrolled by the government in Kabul.

Nevertheless, in the short and mid term, the political situation in CA will largely be related to other processes, particularly those ensuing from the relations of the external power centers around the

region (the U.S.-China-Russia), as well as the anticipated change in power in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

The main uncertainties of the current situation in CA related to the processes going on in and around Afghanistan are as follows:

- development of the situation in the CA countries (social, socioeconomic, and political) in the short and mid term (possible attempts to change power along the lines of the Orange or Arab revolutions or transformation of the situation in the event of a change in the political leader);
- strategic and tactical characteristics, as well as the format of the proposed withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan;
- possible political and military-political agreements between the NATO countries (primarily the U.S.) and CA countries relating to the withdrawal of the international troops from Afghanistan.

The policy of the CA countries in regulating the situation in Afghanistan will most likely presume the following:

1. Stepping up efforts to establish a political dialog with Afghanistan (with all the political forces inside the country), as well as with the neighboring countries and leading power centers interested in retaining its statehood;
2. Rendering assistance to resolve Afghanistan's socioeconomic problems and supporting projects aimed at forming the country's efficient and viable economy.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan will most likely increase their cooperation in the bilateral format, while Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan will put the emphasis on the multilateral structures involved into the Afghan settlement process.

As we know, the CA countries have several diverging views on the situation in Afghanistan. A comparative analysis of their interests related to this country makes it possible to identify several common viewpoints on some issues regarding the economy (the use of Afghanistan's transit potential with access to SA), spheres of security (reducing the threats relating to religious fundamentalism and the export of drugs coming from Afghanistan), and the social sector (implementing joint programs in education, training, and advanced training of personnel).

The CA countries have common interests in Afghanistan. For example, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are paying particular attention to implementing infrastructural projects, as well as investing in industrial facilities. The strivings of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan are related to retaining Afghanistan's integrity and strengthening its stability.

It stands to reason that these common interests and strivings must and should become the foundation of the CA countries' joint efforts to help normalize the situation around Afghanistan.

As for the CSTO, it will assist in reinforcing the Afghan-Tajik border and fighting drug trafficking. However, Russia will not make any supreme efforts to activate this organization as a military-political bloc.