

## A NEW TURN IN U.S. POLICY IN AFGHANISTAN AND CONCOMITANT RISKS FOR CENTRAL ASIA

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### *Introduction*

Afghanistan, a front in the struggle against international terror which appeals to radical Islam and a hub of extremism and international crime, can be described without exaggeration as one of the hottest spots on our planet. The country has been and remains the world's largest drug producer and supplier.

Geographically, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) is one of the closest southern

neighbors of the Central Asian republics; the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen who live on both sides of the former Soviet-Afghan border are closely related in ethnic, cultural, and religious terms.

The common ethnic ties broken by Soviet power are gradually being restored, which makes the Afghan developments even more important for Central Asia.

The continued existence of the Taliban, a terrorist organization which has already survived tens years of America's war on terror, remains the key factor in the country and one of the key factors determining the balance of power in the Af-Pak zone (an invention of the American political and expert communities who brought Afghanistan and Pakistan together in this abbreviation).

The outcome of the war on the Taliban will affect the Central Asian countries and their security, as well as Europe, South, and East Asia (Russia and China in particular).

The events of 2010-2011 show that the U.S.'s Afghan policy has reached a new stage involving new crisis-settlement tactics, the impact of which might extend across the borders.

## The Risks for the Heartland

Today, the Central Asian states are open to a wide range of threats and challenges, some of them created by domestic developments, while others are heated up by what is going on outside the region—terrorism, religious extremism, and drug trafficking being the most obvious and the most real threats.

Economic problems and the low standard of living add attraction to radical ideas; the proximity of Afghanistan and the neighboring hot spots on the map of the world (the so-called salient of Islamic instability: the Northern Caucasus, Xinjiang, and Kashmir) make the threat of terrorism and religious extremism spilling across the border into Central Asia very real. International Islamists rely on ethno-cultural factors to increase their influence in the region.

A fairly ramified and well-coordinated network of Islamic extremist cells presents a real threat to the secular Central Asian regimes; the Islamists have already adjusted their conscription and propaganda methods to the tightened criminal law relating to terrorism and extremism in these countries; they went underground and rely on all sorts of extremist writing and Internet videos.

Instead of calling for a regime change in the Central Asian countries, as practiced in the past, to promote their ideas and lure new members, they criticize democracy and the Western lifestyle. They look for new members among those who support legal Islamic organizations and movements that disagree with mainstream Islam and inculcate "exotic" Islamic trends. The Islamists tailor their propaganda efforts to each social group and each country.

We should always bear in mind that a wider religious infrastructure in any of the local states makes it easier for terrorist groups to operate. A large number of small mosques makes it harder to monitor the religious situation, which allows extremists to effectively promote their ideology among small groups of people. Young men from Central Asian countries educated, or rather indoctrinated, in the Islamic centers of Pakistan and Egypt return as emissaries of all sorts of terrorist groups to popularize radical ideologies among their own people.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (connected with Afghan terrorists) and the armed sorties of Islamists in Tajikistan in the fall of 2010<sup>1</sup> are products of the uncontrolled military strategic situation in Afghanistan. There is information that an Islamic Movement of Kyrgyzstan is taking shape<sup>2</sup>; in May 2010, the Taliban made public its threats toward Kazakhstan.<sup>3</sup> This means that the threats to

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<sup>1</sup> See: "Islamisty vziali na sebia napadenie na tadjhikskikh voennykh," available at [<http://www.lenta.ru/news/2010/09/23/claim/>].

<sup>2</sup> See: "Spetssluzhby predupredili o sozdanii 'Islamskogo dvizhenia Kirgizii,'" available at [<http://www.rosbalt.ru/main/2011/05/03/845310.html>].

<sup>3</sup> See: "Taliby prigrozili Kazakhstanu teraktami za sviazi s NATO," available at [<http://vz.ru/news/2011/5/22/493403.html>].

Central Asian security can be no longer described as probable; they have become possible because the United States and NATO cannot cope with the situation in Afghanistan.

Moreover, the transit of supplies to the counterterrorist coalition and NATO across the territories of Russia and the Central Asian countries makes the threat of terror even more real.

The NATO troops in the IRA cannot stop drug trafficking, while the Central Asian countries, as the closest neighbors of this hub of drug production, are doomed to playing the role of transit countries in the worldwide drug business. They also have to deal with the rapidly increasing number of drug users among their own people.

According to U.N. assessments, between 1998 and 2009, the world's total opium production increased by 78% (from 4,346 to 7,754 tons). This increase, however, was not accompanied by a corresponding increase in drug addiction, which means that a large part of the opium produced is stored somewhere to last for at least two years if opium production is totally liquidated.

According to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, in 2009-2010, Afghanistan accounted for 89% of the opium and heroin produced worldwide (since 2002, the country has been producing 2.5 times more opium than before); 14.3% of the country's population is involved in poppy growing.

To some extent, experts argue, increased drug production is encouraged by destabilization and lack of adequate control, as well as by the greediness of the Afghan heroin producers. According to the U.N., the Afghan peasants, drug dealers, and militants involved in drug trafficking receive about 5% of the revenue created by the world heroin market; 70% of the huge sum fill the pockets of medium-level drug dealers, while 25% covers transit.

Today, the transnational criminal groups that control drug trafficking are seeking cooperation with the terrorist and extremist networks operating in Central Asia. Drug dealers need the ramified terrorist infrastructure already in place and protection of drug transit, while the terrorists and extremists need money to continue their terrorist activities.

After a while, the Islamist terrorist groups might try to snatch control over Central Asian drug traffic from drug traffickers; so far they are capitalizing on their involvement in drug-related criminal activities and closer contacts with the Afghan Islamist groups to cover their growing financial demands and gain a better idea of drug trafficking logistics.

Over time, Central Asian drug trafficking (the routes of which are growing more complicated) might assume ideological hues to become an even greater threat to Central Asian security. Drug-related crimes in Central Asia have already become transnational, which means that the region's states should fight them together.

In October 2010, the drug-related Central Asian context forced the special services of Russia and the United States to carry out the first ever joint operation in Afghanistan; they liquidated four drug laboratories about 5 km away from the border with Pakistan and destroyed 932 kg of heroin (about 200 million doses totaling \$250 million) ready to be sent across Central Asia.<sup>4</sup>

The political turmoil in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan contributes to uncontrolled growth of the drug flows to Europe across Russia and Kazakhstan (along the so-called Northern Route). There is information that drugs are moved mainly via Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan (the U.N. refers to it as "the regional hub of drug trafficking"); they cross Kazakhstan, reach Russia, and are moved further on to Europe, the world's biggest market for Afghan opiates. Drugs (85 tons, 7.6 tons of which are confiscated) reach Europe along several routes (across Balkans, Iran, Turkey, Central Asia and Russia) and are used there.

The Northern Route alone brings in about 95 tons of drugs. The larger part (70 tons, of which no more than 3.4 tons are confiscated) is used in Russia, the world's second largest heroin market.

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<sup>4</sup> See: "Rossia i SShA v pervye proveli sovmetnuiu operatsiiu v Afganistane," available at [<http://www.newsru.com/world/29oct2010/fsknafghan.html>].

The transit countries use about 11 tons of heroin moved across their territories: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan use 1 ton each; Uzbekistan consumes 5 tons; and Kazakhstan 3 tons. No more than 5.2 tons are confiscated: 0.5 tons (the 2008 figure) in Kyrgyzstan; 1.6 tons in Tajikistan; 1.5 tons in Uzbekistan; and 1.6 tons in Kazakhstan.<sup>5</sup>

This means that a meager 5.4% of the total volume of drugs moved along the Northern Routes is confiscated; 12% is used locally. It should be said that the mounting heroin and opium production in Afghanistan and instability in Central Asia are directly responsible for the much greater flow of drugs along the Northern Route. Wedged between the largest heroin producer and heroin consumer, Central Asia is no longer a transit region; it has become a consumer region.

Trade in narcotics is one of the key security threats to Central Asia; it stimulates corruption, which consistently undermines the state, while the growing drug consumption contributes to social degradation.

Contrary to what American experts say, the terrorist threat to Central Asia is rooted inside the region rather than created by the situation around Afghanistan.

It should be said that what some American strategists say about Afghanistan being a direct military or terrorist threat to Central Asia is not quite correct. The Pashtun movement and the terrorist groups of Afghanistan present no direct military threat to the region: they are looking after their own interests in their own territory.

On the other hand, however, the close ties between the Pashtuns and the regional extremist organizations and the spread of their ideology over the vast territory between the Caspian Caucasus and Xinjiang, as well as drug trafficking along the Central Asian route, undermine Central Asian security. Central Asian extremists seek closer ties with the Taliban: they rely on it for training and regard Afghan territory as a safe heaven; corruption among the officers of the national security structures is another outcrop of drug trafficking.<sup>6</sup>

America's military campaign in Afghanistan has intensified the destructive trends in Central Asia, while their triggers are found inside the region.

## Afghan Tactics Changed

The ten years of the counterterrorist operation have seen several U.S. strategies, tactics, and all sorts of conceptions (the Greater Central Asia, AfPak, etc.) approved, applied, and discarded, while the casualties count has been steadily rising.

Late in 2010, under the pressure of the situation in the war-ravaged country that was going from bad to worse, of the domestic political, social, and economic problems and the failed attempt to shift the responsibility for security onto the Afghans, Washington modified its Afghan policy in the most radical way once more. The Obama Administration had to hastily readjust its basic approach to the problem.

Having won more seats in Congress, the Republicans insist that the president and the Pentagon should invigorate the country's policy; the administration responded with a new strategy geared at new landmarks and fresh approaches based on America's long-term interests in the region.

U.S. policy in Afghanistan has changed in the following way.

- *First.* The stress has been shifted from the use of force to reconciliation with the armed opposition: a greater number of American troops brought into the country merely pushed the militants to the previously relatively stable provinces.

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<sup>5</sup> See: *World Drug Report 2010*, U.N.

<sup>6</sup> According to the U.N., however, much less Afghan heroin is moved across Central Asia than across Iran and Turkey.

Washington has to take into account the political reality that emerged during and after the presidential and parliamentary elections (in 2009 and 2010, respectively). Reconciliation and stabilization have been pushed aside by the newly elected parliament that remains idle for want of a common language with President Karzai.

Strategic shifts demanded different, more aggressive military tactics in a wider territory spearheaded at the top commanders of the Taliban and al-Qa'eda (with the help of drones and the marines). In full conformity with the Pentagon's new tactics, operations were moved to the territory of Pakistan.

The recent operations which liquidated Osama bin Laden (rumored to be al-Qa'eda's head) and Mullah Omar (the Taliban leader)<sup>7</sup> testify to the U.S.'s newly acquired resolution and aggressiveness. Seen from Islamabad, this looks like a foreign invasion which does nothing for bilateral relations.

While insisting on liquidation of the top terrorists, experts were fully aware that the Pakistani leaders would not like this. The American presence in Pakistan might stir up a "hornets' nest," jolt into action the so far "neutral" tribal chiefs, and cause a government crisis in the nuclear country.<sup>8</sup>

The election campaign for a second term in the White House forced President Obama to seek some spectacular foreign policy success which means that the military operations launched in Pakistani territory in the spring of 2011 were inevitable.

- *Second.* In the final analysis, the American establishment has recognized that the Afghan problem defies a military solution and that the road to peace and stability lies through economic development, investments, restored infrastructure, and civilized social conditions for all. After ten years of war, the United States has accepted the fact that it cannot bring the war to a victorious end on its own. The White House demonstrated a lot of pragmatism by drawing the neighbors (Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) into the economic processes.

In an effort to share the burden of economic responsibility and stabilize the domestic situation through economic and infrastructural development, America has gone as far as inviting its geopolitical rivals (China, India, Russia, and even Iran) to join Afghanistan's economic rehabilitation.

Each of these countries, on the other hand, wants stabilization in Afghanistan for reasons of its own.

*China* fears that Islamists might gain control over the Uighur separatist movement to strengthen the potential of the Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan and turn Xinjiang into an outpost of terrorist activities in the region. If this happens China might abandon its wait-and-see policy for more active involvement up to and including economic interference in the Afghan conflict to weaken the Taliban. To a great extent, Beijing is attracted by the country's mineral riches and a chance to be involved in their production.

*India* wants tighter control over what is going on in Afghanistan; there is the opinion, however, that Islamabad is deliberately preserving the present far-from-simple situation in the tribal zone to rely on it in the event of another military conflict with India.

On the other hand, the growing Indian economy needs oil and gas; this makes a pipeline from the Caspian energy basin and other large resource-related projects a vital necessity.

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<sup>7</sup> There is information that the Taliban leader is still alive (see, for example [<http://vz.ru/news/2011/5/23/493608.html>]).

<sup>8</sup> See: E. Kirsanov, "O vozmozhnom izmenenii strategii SShA v Afghanistane," Institut Blizhnego Vostoka, 27 December, 2010, available at [<http://i-r-p.ru/page/stream-exchange/index-26913.html>].

Russia wants to recapture its position in Afghanistan for several reasons, security, geopolitics, and the economy being its major concerns.

- First, the Kremlin wants closer involvement in dealing with drug production and trafficking and a chance to watch what Washington is doing in Afghanistan at closer range.
- Second, Russia, very much like all the other players, is pursuing purely economic interests: it needs another market for its weapons and another source of natural resources.

So far, none of the countries involved in Afghanistan has scored spectacular victories, but they might be successful some time in the future.

- *Third.* The United States will hold onto its status of main operator in Afghanistan; it has come to stay. Indeed, the strategic advantages of control over the territory where the geopolitical and economic interests of big Eurasian players (Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran) are concentrated cannot be overestimated. This is not all: Afghanistan is the key to Central Asia.

The United States is consistently putting off the date for pulling its forces out of Afghanistan, which was initially planned for 2011. Later, Washington announced that it will not leave the country before the Afghan armed forces and police are ready to ensure stability and security in the country.

So far, terrorist acts have become a daily occurrence in practically all regions, their methods being constantly “improved,” if we can put it this way; the security system has become one of the targets of the suicide bombers clad in uniforms of the Afghan national army and the ISAF and carrying forged identity cards. Not infrequently, militants worm their way into the IRA defense and security structures to destroy as many of the foreign servicemen as possible.

In the winter of 2010/11, the number of terrorist acts reached its peak of 650 per month on average; this indicates that the Taliban has dropped its old practice of taking a respite in winter.

Compared with similar periods (starting in 2002), the 1st quarter of 2011 was marked by the largest number of terrorist acts of all sorts; it reached its peak in March (1,102 terrorist acts). There were 1,300 incidents in the 1st quarter of 2009, over 1,790 in 2010, and 2,700 in 2011.<sup>9</sup>

Liquidation of al-Qa‘eda’s leader will add vehemence to terrorist activities; in anticipation of negative developments and terrorist acts against the forces and bases of the international coalition, the law and order structures of Afghanistan warned that troop movements in all large cities, including the capital, should be limited to the absolute minimum.

Pakistan is also threatened: several days after Terrorist No. 1 had been liquidated, a twin suicide bomb attack at a training center of armed border police in Charsadda (northwest Pakistan) 30 km away from Peshawar, the capital of the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province, killed 83 people and injured more than 115 others. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) assumed responsibility; “It’s the first revenge for Bin Laden’s martyrdom,” said their spokesmen. “Wait for bigger attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan.”<sup>10</sup>

- *Fourth.* America might move its forces into Pakistan; this possibility is a stumbling block in the relations between the two countries; Washington had promised the leaders of Pakistan earlier that it would keep away from its territory. Officially, the drone attacks on the Taliban and al-Qa‘eda (with which Islamabad is allegedly at war) are described as “penetration of Pakistani territory by unidentified flying objects” so as not to stir up the powerful and so far neutral tribal chiefs in the tribal zone.

<sup>9</sup> Based on the figures found in [www.antiterror.ru].

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/3578697/Osama-Bin-Laden-revenge-blasts-kill-80.html].

The presence of foreign armed infidels in the country might irritate the nation as contradicting Islam and lead to a deterioration of the situation in the tribal zone and along the entire stretch of the Afghan border. The Pakistanis might respond with armed attacks on military convoys which cross the country, the recently tested “persuasion” method which defies effective retaliation from the Americans and their allies.<sup>11</sup>

In May, the situation changed suddenly and unexpectedly. The American military liquidated Bin Laden, causing a lot of complications between Islamabad and Washington and increasing political tension inside the country. The public was angry with its own military and special services who had allowed American marines to operate inside the country; the radical religious circles of Pakistan were enraged.

America and Pakistan, however, will remain partners because America needs Islamabad to locate al Zawahiri, Bin Laden’s closest assistant, and the leaders of al-Qa’eda cells.

Islamabad, in turn, needs the United States not only for continued financial aid; it is fully aware that Washington can stir up the tribal zone and demonstrate more determination and aggressiveness when fighting the Taliban on both sides of the border; political complications inside the country will follow.

Some experts doubt that Osama bin Laden has indeed been liquidated, but everything the coalition has done in this connection looks like one of the United States’ most radical geopolitical steps. Despite the earlier official statements, the liquidation of Terrorist No. 1 will not lead to the U.S. cutting down its military presence in Afghanistan.

This is logical: when readying for the pull-out the United States invited Afghanistan to sign an agreement on long-term strategic partnership (the Afghan leaders accepted the idea), under which America will leave behind several military bases. Back in 2009, Washington revised its Afghan and Pakistani strategy, the status of the latter was changed from “frontline fighter against terrorism” to “terrorist safe haven.”

The changes in the U.S. defense and security structures show that the Afghan-Pakistani factor is coming to the fore in America’s geostrategy. General Petraeus, former ISAF commander, believed to be the main architect of the AfPak strategy, was appointed CIA Director. It seems that having removed Bin Laden, Washington will have a better chance of addressing some other tactical and strategic tasks and improving its image damaged by the protracted counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan. It should be said that NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton confirmed that NATO would go on with its mission in Afghanistan despite Bin Laden’s removal.

If relations with Pakistan deteriorate still further, Washington will have the opportunity to show the world that its previous assessments of Pakistan as a source of terror were correct and reconfirm its moral right to go on with antiterrorist operations. We should not exclude the possibility that information about liquidation of the leader of the radical Islamists was intended to provoke a bout of terror, giving license for America to remain in the region.

There is another reason for America’s continued presence: the pace of building an efficient national army and defense and security structures is too slow to transfer military operations to them any time soon. A large number of local people conscripted in great numbers to the armed forces end up deserting because of inadequate ideological and financial motivation. The efforts to build an army based on Western standards are unable to take off because the newly conscripted soldiers from among the northern national minorities are sent to the Pashtun south where “aliens” are hardly tolerated.

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<sup>11</sup> See: E. Kirsanov, *op. cit.*

Washington can capitalize on Kabul's inability to start a dialog with the Taliban, the leaders of which agree to talk when and if all foreign troops have been removed from the country; Kabul insists on immediate discontinuation of the armed struggle and severed contacts with terrorist structures. Continued instability is a direct product of the widely different approaches.

The military of Pakistan can put pressure on the Taliban leaders and play an important role in the Afghan dialog, as well as in the realization of NATO strategy designed to settle the conflict. In view of the next bout of worsened relations between the United States and Pakistan, the latter is hardly prepared to help the White House, at least in the near future.

On the other hand, their worsened relations are fraught with numerous complications. Pakistan can resort to measures which might complicate, and has complicated, cargo traffic. According to the media, in mid-May 2011, regular units of the Pakistani army shelled two American combat helicopters on the border with North Waziristan.

Merely twenty-four hours after the meetings between Senator John F. Kelly, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, with President Asif Ali Zardari, Premier Yousaf Raza Gillani, and Chief Army Commander General Ashraf Parvez Kayani that took place on 16 May, 2011, there was an armed clash between Americans and Pakistanis. According to media reports, the sides agreed to "reset" their relations; speaking at a press conference, the senator announced that the Pakistani military had agreed to return the tail of the U.S. secret stealth helicopter that broke down on Bin Laden's compound.<sup>12</sup>

On 21 May, 2011, a tanker carrying fuel for NATO forces was blasted in the northwest of Pakistan killing at least 16; 11 more fuel carriers were blasted on the Afghan border.

In view of its worsened relations with Pakistan, the United States intends to increase the volume of non-military cargoes for the American troops in Afghanistan carried across Russia and Central Asia to 75%.<sup>13</sup>

It seems that the Pentagon is readying for the worst possible scenario; according to the American military, even if the extremists in Pakistan manage to block the roads used to bring non-military cargoes for American troops (including fuel) from the port of Karachi to Afghanistan, "this will merely create certain problems," but will not "bring the Afghan operation to an end." The coalition will not retreat, even if the government of Pakistan recalls, for any reason, its previous transit agreement. There are two other (albeit more expensive) options: the air route or moving greater volumes by land across Central Asia.<sup>14</sup>

This means that Washington will never completely pull its troops out of Afghanistan; it is merely looking for alternative options of regional cooperation to correspond to the current geopolitical context in an obvious effort to remain in control of all and everything and to avoid new risks and new challenges.

## Afghanistan Ten Years Later: Conclusions and Forecasts

Washington will build its Afghan strategy on double-track approaches as a combination of offensive and precision military operations and efforts designed to achieve reconciliation and economic

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<sup>12</sup> "Usama bin Laden rasshatal otnoshenia SShA i Pakistana," available at [<http://kommersant.ru/doc/1642887/print>].

<sup>13</sup> [<http://www.rosbalt.ru/main/2011/05/23/851121.html>].

<sup>14</sup> See: "SShA budut napravliat bolshe gruzov v Afghanistan cherez Rossiiu," available at [<http://vz.ru/news/2011/5/23/493429.html>].



revival. By setting up a battle-worthy Afghan national army, the United States will shift responsibility for security to it in order to concentrate on economic gains by developing Afghanistan's natural riches (according to the largest American corporations, Afghanistan has up to 3.6 billion barrels of oil and up to 36.5 trillion cu m of gas<sup>15</sup>).

So far, Washington's intention to speed up the development of statehood in Afghanistan is running across numerous obstacles in the security sphere and is impeded by the country's completely ruined economy. There is no long-term conception of the country's statehood; its place in the regional system of political relations has not been identified, while the country is still looking for its national identity.

The future state and the future army will need trained personnel, which is so far in short supply in Afghanistan.

In the spring of 2011, the coalition used its obvious superiority in aviation and armored units to draw the Taliban into direct armed contact in some of the Northern provinces and liquidate a large part of the enemy's manpower. No matter how hard it tries, mines and suicide bombers, the Taliban's main weapons, cannot deliver equally crushing blows on the Afghan national forces and ISAF.

If in the next couple of years the course of fighting remains the same, the armed opposition in Afghanistan will be crippled beyond repair; it will be driven out of at least some of the regions and lose a lot of its political weight inside the country.<sup>16</sup>

The Taliban is not the only problem; Afghanistan's dependence on external forces (the U.S., Pakistan, and Iran), which try to impose their own development options and models on it, is another destabilization factor. The external actors are placing their stakes on the Afghan clans; this makes the future of Afghanistan as a single state dubious, fans inner Afghan contradictions, and aggravates the risks and threats to its neighbors.

One of the biggest donor-countries, India, supported by the United States, invests \$2.1 billion and wants a greater political role in Kabul.

China is accelerating its involvement; it needs Afghanistan to address several of its geopolitical and military-strategic tasks and to get access to its large mining projects.

Islamabad still regards Afghanistan as its sphere of influence and its "back yard;" its political establishment is trying to keep other political players under its control and perpetuate its grip on the country.

The military elite of Pakistan see Afghanistan as their geopolitical resource and a space where non-government units and terrorist groups acting in the interests of Islamabad can camp. The people at the helm in Afghanistan are loyal to Islamabad; they are prepared to let it use its territory for maneuvering and regrouping in the event of a conflict with India and large-scale mobilization of a multi-million army.<sup>17</sup>

The efficiency of America's new policy in Afghanistan will depend on the level and nature of its relations with Pakistan, which traditionally carries a lot of clout with Afghanistan, and on the ability of President Obama and his administration to maintain a consistent pragmatic dialog with the other players actively involved in the Afghan entanglement in expectation of future (so far virtual) economic gains.

On the other hand, the government of Hamid Karzai is trying its hand at independent foreign policy games to expand its foreign policy space and capitalize on the intention of America, Pakistan, Iran, India, and Russia to increase their influence on Kabul.

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<sup>15</sup> [[http://www.lukoil-overseas.ru/upload/iblock/3c7/oil\\_news\\_06z77r.pdf](http://www.lukoil-overseas.ru/upload/iblock/3c7/oil_news_06z77r.pdf)].

<sup>16</sup> See: N. Mendkovich, "Taliban' teriaet pozitsii v Afghanistane," available at [<http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/19906.html>].

<sup>17</sup> See: D. Savchenko, "Pakistan i India v borbe za Afghanistan," available at [<http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/19737.html>].

Today, this rivalry has reached a new and higher stage; the rivals are not only trying to achieve security in Afghanistan, but also to receive maximum economic gain.

### *Conclusion*

On 7 October, 2001, the United States and its allies started a “short war” which turned out to be a long campaign; today, the 100-thousand-strong NATO contingent in Afghanistan is trying to support and encourage the rising democracy and keep at bay the mounting wave of unrest.<sup>18</sup>

The counterterrorist operation has drawn all of Afghanistan’s neighbors into its orbit; having stationed its military contingents in Central Asia, Washington acquired the keys to Eurasian geopolitics; by liquidating Bin Laden and his crony Mullah Omar, the U.S. fortified its regional position.

By remaining in Afghanistan, America is preserving its long-term military-strategic position in Central Asia and holding onto the “keys to the geopolitical heartland.” We should not expect a pull-out in the next 10 to 20 years because the interests of too many countries are tied up in the “Afghan security knot,” while America’s military presence remains the only guarantee of continued control over the potentially volatile situation.

America has demonstrated impressive political flexibility by “flirting” with India, China, Russia, and the Central Asian countries for the sake of the continued efficiency of its military presence. On the other hand, the countries with interests in Afghanistan are, wittingly or unwittingly, helping the United States to realize its own plans in this country.

Sure of its position in Afghanistan to the extent that it has diversified its access to the country, Washington is little concerned about the mounting coolness in its relations with its former ally. The White House wisely improved its relations with Russia and Central Asia to become less dependent on Islamabad.

So far, it is anybody’s guess why the United States has been seeking the support of many countries; it seems that it wanted to be less dependent on Pakistan when fighting in Afghanistan; it is probably deliberately creating seats of tension along the Central Asian border by ignoring the terrorists operating in the country’s north to legitimize its military presence in Afghanistan. This has borne fruit: the local governments never stop worrying about the Afghan threat. A regular information war for you!

Today, even those countries that never hailed the Americans in the region would prefer that they stay, even though they never say this. It seems that the United States has played wisely, its considerable losses and strategic blunders aside.

This, however, raises the justified question of whether Afghanistan has a future as an independent state and what will happen to regional security in Central Asia?

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<sup>18</sup> See: “Delo v Afghaništane u SShA idet k povtoru togo, chto sluchilos s SSSR,” available at [<http://www.centrasia.ru/news2.php?st=1290759240>].