

THE AFGHAN ISSUE IN A REGIONAL CONTEXT. REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:

We aim to analyze a space relevant from a geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic point of view, where important global actors, in terms of social and security issues, are both in partnership and in competition. Many relevant actors of the international system militate for the establishment of a climate of stability and of a joint agenda for solving any potential issue that may occur. Such an example is the joint action against social and security risks, generated by the uncontrolled movements of Afghans in the region.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Central Asia, NATO, Shanghai Cooperation Organization*

Introduction

A large number of studies and analyses evoke in a minute and well-articulated manner the evolution of the Afghan society in time, the foreign influences and external interferences, the endless riots and wars and, especially, the strategic importance of Afghanistan¹ in Central Asia ((Frunzuliță, 2013)). The essential benchmarks of its modern existence, such as "The Big Game"² of the XIXth century; the abolition of monarchy and the

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¹ The term, „the land of Afghans” was first used in 1801, by the English in India. Its oldest inhabitants are ethnic Pashtuns (considered typical Afghans), which make up 42% of the population, and, from a ethno-genetic point of view, are a branch of eastern irasniens, counting 43 million people, which makes them the largest distinct ethnic group of the whole world (14 million in Afghanistan, the rest in Pakistan). They are organized in 60 tribes, divided in 400 clans, all of them Sunni Muslims.

² This term was used to describe the strategies and the conflict for supremacy in Central Asia between the British and Tsarist Empire. The term was attributed to Albert Connolly (1807-1842), an English intelligence officer in the light cavalry corps in Bengal, in the British East India Company.

communist coup; the Soviet occupation; the Taliban regime and the intervention of the international coalition in 2001 aiming to oust the Taliban from power, reveal once again the geostrategic importance of this space that connects, the Middle East to Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

Generally speaking, due to prolonged military actions, Afghanistan is currently – and unfortunately will continue to be – a source of threats and dangers that only highlight the fact that standard military and economic actions are not efficient in order to solve the situation. The Afghan issue can be found on the political agenda of the most important state and non-state actors; viable strategies for intensive reconstruction of the state and for turning it into an independent and powerful state are being drawn up. But it is necessary to elaborate and implement new complex and efficient approaches on a humanitarian, political and social-economic level that would contribute to solving the problem of creating and consolidating the Afghan state. New approaches and development methods are needed in order to allow Afghanistan to gain its independence, reconstruct its state of affairs, and move from an underdeveloped economy and society – influenced by an economy based on drug trafficking that makes up more than half of the country's GDP – to a flourishing and consolidated society.

Developing Afghanistan is an option opposed to that suggested by advocates for noninterference in the Afghan situation, for the limitation to individual humanitarian actions, and for developing projects that have a symbolic importance, or for the division of Afghanistan in two states – Northern and Southern – following the borders that confine various ethnical communities.

Influential factors in Afghanistan

The most important factors that have an influence in Afghanistan are the USA and NATO, the EU, the countries that are part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (member states, observers and partners in dialogue), such as Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, countries in the Central-Asian region (especially its neighbors, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), India. But since October 2001, the main means of influencing the still unstable situation from Afghanistan are held by the Euro-Atlantic community. It seems that peace cannot be established via military means, and the continuation of this process cannot lead to beneficial effects. All of Afghanistan's neighbors need it to be stable and demilitarized in order to

achieve their national interests while a peaceful settlement of the Afghan situation is on their agenda.

In 2001 these states were included in the contact group on the Afghan issue that was functioning within UNO which was later joined by Russia, USA, NATO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), creating the 7+5 format. It is not excluded that within this format the misunderstandings between traditional rivals might find a continuation in Afghanistan; it is also not excluded that precisely in this context the SCO platform might contribute to finding similar positions and to reducing tensions in international relations in the region, with a view to providing regional security. The need to activate regional cooperation is triggered by common interests regarding the fight against terrorist networks, regional criminality, as well as a common interest in Afghanistan's development. This is the case of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, countries that exert a heavy influence in the North of the country and that aim to start large projects (building a railway network, a gas pipeline), that would consistently contribute to Afghanistan's development, and would lead to a consolidation of regional cooperation and would provide security.

Moreover, in the past years outside the Central Asian space, Pakistan and Iran, tightly linked to Afghanistan from a historical and civilization point of view, have intensified their influence, investing considerable sums in restoring the Afghan economy and sending funds for vital areas, such as agriculture and energy. It is clear that in the future any of these factors, independently or in cooperation, may influence the internal and external political processes of the new Afghanistan with respect to economy.

We consider that stability in Afghanistan can be ensured only via negotiations and compromises, but we do not agree with opinions such as "after the withdrawal of the coalition troops, military observers from neighboring countries should be sent." Practically, in a region torn by decades of wars, the presence of military troops - be they observers - may bring about conditions for conflict.

Nevertheless, the attempt to solve the Afghan issue does not properly focus on the complex geopolitical factors that influence the situation of the country. Afghanistan seems to be "torn" in a few directions: in the South, Pakistan is intensifying its influence; Iran is controlling the Western regions; Tajiks and Uzbeks dominate in the North, both of them trying to keep

Pashtuns off the region; the Center of the country is controlled by government forces, and in the North-East, China and India have clashing interests. In this context, powerful states and Northern neighbors support their own clients: Russia and Tajikistan – the Afghan Tajiks, Uzbekistan – the Afghan Uzbeks, Iran-Hazaris, which only deepens the national schism and does not contribute to creating the conditions for a possible integration of the country in a regional community. The cooperation format with the Northern neighbors is limited to economic relations; in politics there are not yet conditions for a possible future integration; and from a psychological and political-ideological point of view, the country is severed by a barrier, since both Afghanistan and the Central-Asian states are under the different and sometimes contradictory influence of great powers – USA and Russia, which puts Afghanistan's relations with these countries under the influence of the balance between power and politics of the two great powers.

As it is well-known, Afghans did not emerge as a unique nation, and the political conflict is not separated from the regional, inter-ethnic, inter-denominational (Sunni vs. Shia) and intra-denominational ones. According to the former Minister-Counselor of ex-President Karzai, Wahidullah Saboun, "the influence of old tribes, traditions of ethnic groups, collaborations with Jihad, brotherhood, the common Islamic and national culture, the religious attachment of the people, are factors that may bring success in establishing peace in the country, if we take them into account. We have to open negotiations on various channels and use the influence of older tribes, of Jihad leaders that hold authority, of tendencies of brotherhood and national unity, of peaceful movements in various areas of the country, where peace is threatened, and we must involve the people in this process. Peace among Afghans, based on a feeling of national revival, would not only open a road to Afghanistan's reconstructions, but would provide national security, would create favorable conditions to develop economic, commercial relations with the Eastern and Northern Neighbors of Afghanistan." (Saboun, 2008, p. 217-219).

Central-Asian states are interested in a stable, independent Afghanistan, one of the key issues of the region being the reconstruction of its geopolitical integrity. If in the 90's integration models included states in the post-Soviet space, presently a tendency to consolidate the territorial integration of Central Asia is visible. A good example in this respect is the

Shanghai Cooperation Organization which includes all states in the region as members or observers.

Afghanistan, as observer within SCO, is the organization's responsibility. In this context, a Russian think tank proposed to create the Afghan Fund of SCO, involving the drawing up and implementation of a Complex Development Plan for Afghanistan, together with other UNO initiatives for the country's development³. On the other hand, the SCO's reaction mechanisms to emerging threats and to the current necessities of the regional and national economic development have not yet been created. For instance, the issue of poverty reduction is a stringent one and the SCO can play an important role, but not before mapping the main directions in solving the social issues inside its own members. From this point of view, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are the weakest links. This is not only a results of the two countries' profile, but also due to the perspective of their turning into a "corridor for re-export of terrorists, radicals and narcotics from Afghanistan to Kazakhstan and Russia." No wonder that, at the end of 2014, the heads of border police in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan analyzed the consequences of the coalition troops' withdrawal, drawing the attention to the main threats in the region - drug trafficking, but also to the ongoing infiltration threat of religious extremist and terrorist ideologies.

At the same time, CSTO has approved the establishment of an interstate program to consolidate the Tajik-Afghan border by sending technical and military aid and including it in the Russian-Kazakh anti-aerial protection system.

A current issue is also the need to establish the SCO's priorities with a view to solving social problems, since these are most of the times the source of threats to security. It is important for SCO to create modernization projects that would outline main directions for solving all social problems. In the near future, SCO will probably have to adopt a new strategic concept that would make the transition to ensuring general security, including here the fight against poverty. Such a concept would contribute to increasing the development of states where this approach will be employed.

³ This group is made up of experts of the Demography, Migration and Regional Development Institute, such as I Krupnov, A. Derenikian, I. Batırşin, B. Krupnov, S. Melentiev and puts forward the geostrategic conception of the New Middle East, a unique geo-economic and geostrategic region, which has to become the nucleus of the common Central-Asian market and a platform for dialogue for its peoples and civilizations.

Currently, is it hard to render concrete the potential for SCO-CSTO, SCO-NATO, and CSTO and NATO collaboration; firstly, it is vital to coordinate the activities of CSTO, SCO and NATO in order to evaluate interests in the area. Mutual relations will ease the mapping of the areas functionally responsible for maintaining stability and security in Eurasia, and will allow the coordination of its members' interests. This new step in collaboration between SCTO, SCO and NATO members (where the main role belongs to USA and the states forming the base of EU - France, Germany and Great Britain) will lead to global level of ensuring security. Cooperation between these organizations will contribute to consolidating peace in the Eurasian continent due to the fact that there are five permanent members of the Security Council within CSTO, SCO and NATO (Russia, China, USA, Great Britain, and France). Analyzing and counteracting challenges and threats including terrorism, organized crime, uncontrolled migration, drug trafficking and proliferation of WMD may be the main concern for cooperation between CSTO, SCO and NATO.

Although during the 13 years ISAF and Afghanistan have faced dramatic loss of life, since January the 1st, 2015 NATO has continued its peace-keeping operations - Resolute Support, based on the agreement signed by both parties in September 2014 regarding the status of the international military contingent on Afghan territory (approximately 12 thousand troops). The purpose of the mission is to train and increase the professionalism of the staff within the Afghan security services, police and army, to provide technology and to develop counter-terrorist actions against Al-Qaeda affiliated cells, all this by the end of 2016.

It is yet to be seen to what extent there will be a consensus with regard to Afghanistan, especially on finding a solution for sustainable internal politics that would internationally and regionally grant a "Great Afghanistan National Reconciliation." (Frunzuliță, 2013, p. 154) For the moment, specialists' opinion vary from pessimism - caused by violence, corruption, drug production and non-coherent international presence, to optimism triggered by the new changes in internal politics that will manage to change the course of events. At the same time, it is difficult to identify the proper strategy based on realistic approaches to be implemented after funds are allotted, political will is expressed and external factors exert influence upon a traumatized and divided Afghan population. Moreover, the existence of several strategies reveals certain dissensions between the actors involved.

Forecasts regarding the evolution of the situation in Central Asia after the withdrawal of the coalition troops from Afghanistan

We bring forward three scenarios related to the evolution of the situation in Central Asia, between 2014 and 2024, after the withdrawal of the coalition troops from Afghanistan. These were designed by a team of participants at the Summer School of the Russian Union of the Democratic Youth, "The Situation in Central Asia: security, economy, human development" (Bekebaeva, 2013), which was organized in Ekaterinburg, August 20-27, 2012.

These experts have identified three possible tracks of action on a medium term, starting from the identification and outlining of the main actors and their interests in the Central Asian region, under the circumstances of the foretold retreat. One must mention the fact that, from a political point of view, Central Asia is an unstable area, a fact triggered mainly by the contradictory interests of the states that form it. Central Asia is an assembly of contradictions, bringing together critical issues from various fields: discussions related to water resources, the multitude of latent conflicts, the political unrest, and the ethnical and interstate contradictions. The evident conflictual character can be reduced to the fact that the aggravation of one problem may attract the aggravation of all the others mentioned. Thus, the sources of the present problems are caused by the unequal distribution of the water resources (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are rich in water resources, while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan depend on these), the low level of economic interaction among the countries in the area, the rivalry for regional leadership between the two important countries, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, while the main threats for the area are drug trafficking, the unstable situation in Afghanistan, the terrorists threats, the ever growing impact of the Islamic factor, the socio-economic instability, and, why not, the lack of a clear policy from the most relevant state actor in the area, namely Russia. From the analysis of the Russian experts we shall depict, synthetically, only the conclusions subsumed to the security dimension, the other dimensions – economic, energy, ecology and the socio-humanitarian – being of less importance for our study.

Scenario I – "The Fire Dragon: the consolidation of China"

It is assumed that, after the withdrawal of the coalition troops from Afghanistan, in 2014, the influence of the U.S.A. and Russia in Central Asia will diminish gradually, being limited to the implementation of the antiterrorist

and antidrug programs, together with the other states in Central Asia, or to the maintenance of the military bases, while China will gradually conquer new positions in the area, consolidating its influence in the economic sphere. On the other hand, China will be sensitive to the security issues in Central Asia and Afghanistan, being interested, as a founding member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in the regional initiatives against terrorism, religious extremism and separatism.

Scenario II – “The Anaconda Strategy: The West restrains China”

U.S.A. will stop the geopolitical offensive of the Popular Republic of China in Central Asia, establishing alliances with regional countries, or setting military bases that will be not only a factor of its presence in Afghanistan, but also a tool of American indirect politico-military pressure on China and Iran. Equally, U.S.A. will intend to increase their influence in the region in order not to allow the intensification of the Chinese presence, by shaping anti-Chinese orientations among the elite and the consciousness of the masses in Central Asia and, probably, in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. One cannot exclude an increase of the fluxes of economic help of the countries in the area, most probably not from the proper budget, but by means of the international financial institutions.

Scenario III – “The Green Crescent over Central Asia”

A possible aggravation of the situation in Afghanistan will allow the consolidation of the position of the Talibans and repressions on the latter's behalf against the persons that have established relations with the structures of the coalition. As a consequence of this, there will be a flux of refugees to the neighboring countries from Central Asia – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, which will result in pressure on their economies, the increase of the illegal weapon trafficking, the intensification of drug trafficking and the possible escalation of the religious and interethnic conflicts in the Fergana Valley. Also, the formation of pro-Islamic regimes is a possibility.

Conclusions

It is obvious that one cannot ignore the de facto geopolitical realities in Afghanistan; one must consider the real decentralization of Afghanistan, the centralized power in Kabul being rather weak at the periphery. The participants to the cooperation format 7+5 could contribute to the creation of a stable, legitimate, and democratic structure, taking into account the

geographical dimensions of the country, the ethnic variety, the cultural history, as well as the borders artificially delineated and the transformation, in the past, of Afghanistan, in a buffer zone between the spheres of influence of the great powers in the 19th century, namely Russia and England. Taking into account the pluralism of the geopolitical views from the political circles and the circles of experts, one must wait and see whether such a structural change will take place in a more or less remote future.

Acknowledgement: This material does not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Union or the Romanian Government. This paper is made and published under the aegis of the Research Institute for the Quality of Life, Romanian Academy, as part of the programme co-funded by the European Union within the Operational Sectorial Programme for Human Resources Development through the project "Pluri and interdisciplinary in doctoral and post-doctoral programmes". Project Code: POSDRU/159/1.5/S/141086.

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