

PROBLEM-2014 AND CENTRAL ASIAN SECURITY

Konstantin SYROEZHKIN

*D.Sc. (Political Science), Professor, Chief Research Associate,
Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies under the President of the RK
(Almaty, Kazakhstan)*

ABSTRACT

The author analyzes the outcome of the 12 years of the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan and the problems it has created. He looks at some of the political aspects related to the 2014 pullout and the main threats and challenges to regional security emanating from Afghanistan.

The external threats to regional security, their potential exacerbation because of the coalition withdrawal, and their potential localization are likewise analyzed.

He also examines the SCO's possible involvement in settling the Afghan problem and the fields and spheres in which this organization could apply its potential.

KEYWORDS: *Afghanistan, narco-transit, regional security, Problem-2014, the SCO.*

Introduction

Today, the question of how the coalition pullout will affect Central Asia figures prominently on the agenda. The forecasts are numerous and mainly pessimistic: most people agree that Central Asia has accumulated too many problems created by radical Islamism and extremism kept under the lid by the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan and that they will inevitably burst out after the pullout.

Like many of my colleagues, I am not optimistic about the region's future, however I disagree with them on some points.

- First, I am not absolutely convinced that the coalition shielded Central Asia from the Afghan threats more effectively than the Northern Alliance before it. On top of this, the Northern Alliance did not create new threats and never sought destabilization across the entire region.
- Second, I do not believe that if the Taliban comes to power in Kabul it will inevitably expand northward. It seems that the Taliban and people in power in Kabul will have too many problems on their hands to look to the north: the pullout will start another stage of the civil war fraught with the country's partition into ethnic regions.

Seen from Central Asia, this situation is not comfortable, but not threatening if fighters from Afghanistan are prevented from infiltrating into the region. The transportation-logistics and pipeline projects, on the other hand, will be shelved because of the civil war.

- Third, there are people who say that the armaments and military equipment the United States plans to leave behind, mainly in Uzbekistan, will change the regional balance of power. Today, Uzbekistan has the strongest and the most combat-worthy army in the region; the status quo will not be changed by deliveries of Russian armaments to Kyrgyzstan or by the huge sum of \$300-400 million that will be poured into modernization of Tajikistan's armed forces.

I am convinced (or almost convinced) that what some Russian experts are saying about future wars over water resources in Central Asia or for ethnic reasons can be described as science fiction. Local conflicts are possible, but a large-scale war is absolutely impossible.

The Afghan Problem: Today and Tomorrow

In the fall of 2013, it will be 12 years since the United States and NATO launched their counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan; the results of these years leave much to be desired. Indeed, these twelve long years have proven too short for the Western coalition to realize its initial aims. The Taliban is more alive than ever: it is gradually tightening its grip on the situation in the context of Hamid Karzai's failed government and the coalition's desire to pull out as quickly as possible. It strengthened its position while the Western coalition poured more and more troops into the country. This means that those who say there is no military solution to the Afghan problem are right.

The country's economy is ruined; a large part of foreign funding goes to foreign NGOs as payment for consultations, the rest is embezzled. Corruption, everyday and political racketeering, arbitrary rule of the local authorities, etc. have become run of the mill.

Afghanistan is still the world's largest producer of fresh opium (see Diagram 1) and one of the world's largest producers of heroin (90% of the heroin consumed around the world originates in Afghanistan).¹ The area of land under opium cultivation increased from 131 to 154 thousand hectares after the drought of 2012, which predictably increased drug production.²

One cannot but be amazed that the coalition, armed with a complete range of information about the structure of drug industry and drug transit in Afghanistan and personal files on practically all drug barons, has remained passive throughout the twelve years of its presence in the country.

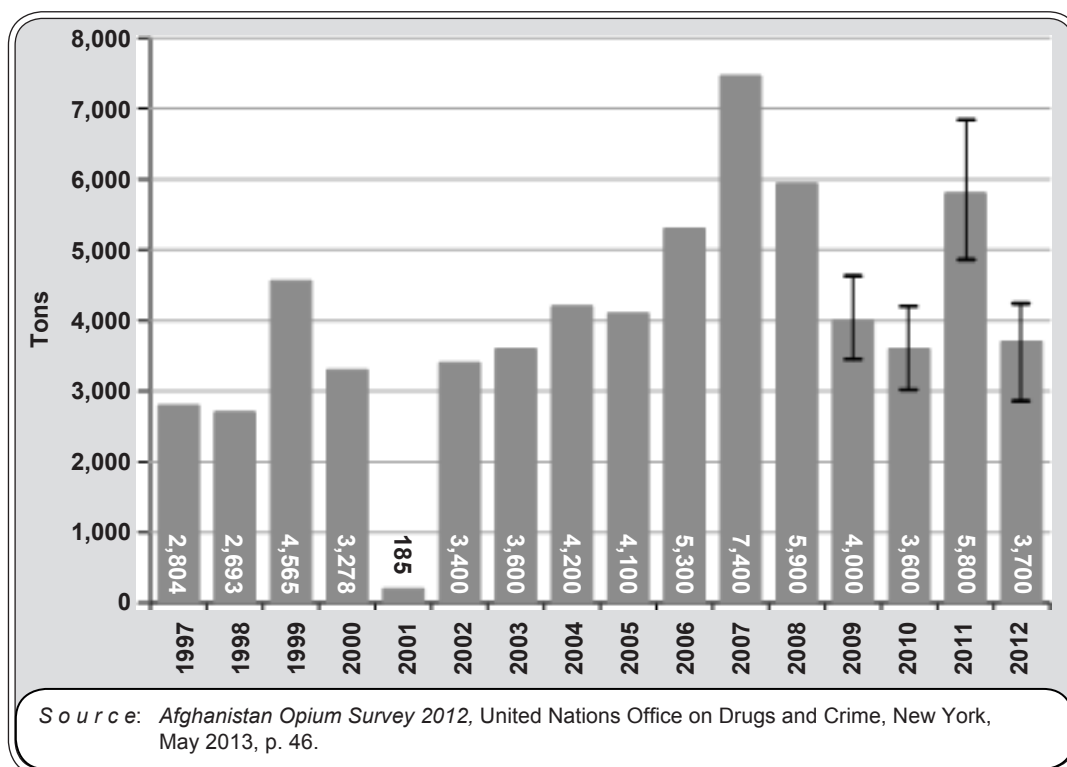
According to at least some experts, during the years of the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan, the local "drug dealers set up full-scale production, financial, and banking infrastructures competitive with the leaders of world banking. They organized harvesting of opium poppy and fresh opium, centralized delivery to storage facilities, processing into morphine and heroin, and their delivery along well-organized routes."³ We have every reason to suspect that the United States does not

¹ According to the RF Federal Service of Drugs Control, the Afghan drug barons produce 94% of the world's volume of opiates. Head of the Federal Service Victor Ivanov has quoted the following figures: every year Afghanistan produces and sells drugs totaling \$65 billion. Every year \$17 billion-worth of drugs are moved along the so-called northern route; a large or even the largest share of them is used in the transit countries. Thirty-five percent of narcotics transported from Afghanistan reaches Russia (see: "RF napomnit NATO ob obiazatelstvakh po borbe s Afghanskimi narkotikami," RIA Novosti, 19 March, 2010, available at [<http://www.rian.ru/>]).

² See: *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2012*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, New York, May 2013, p. 13.

³ See: I. Khokhlov, "Proizvodstvo opiynykh narkotikov (geroina) v Afghanistane: infrastruktura narkobiznesa," available at [<http://www.nationalsecurity.ru/library/00021>].

Diagram 1

Dynamics of Drug Production in Afghanistan
in 1997-2012, tons

want to liquidate drug production in Afghanistan and is even directly involved in it (this is what Zamir Kabulov, Special Presidential Envoy to Afghanistan, thinks).⁴

The fact that the decision of the Budapest conference of the defense ministers of NATO member countries (held in October 2008) to use the ISAF in fighting illegal drug production was practically ignored cannot but cause concern.

It should be said that while in 2008-2010 the areas under opium poppy shrank, in 2011-2012, the opposite trend became very obvious (see Diagram 2). The number of people involved in drug production increased from 2.4 million in 2008 to 3.4 million in 2009 and 3.42 million in 2010.⁵

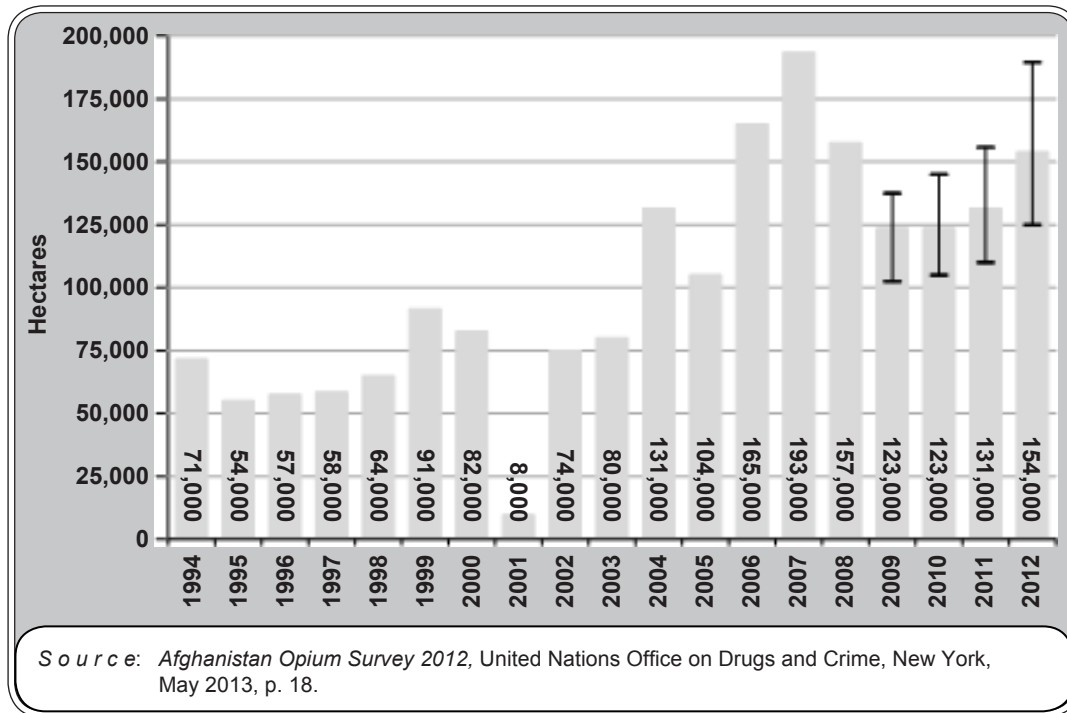
In 2009-2010, the areas under opium poppy shrank; in 2010 and 2012 the volume of opium production dropped, however, these facts cannot deceive anyone. "UNODC estimated that at the end

⁴ There is information that the coalition servicemen buy drugs wholesale at the markets of Kandahar, move them to the airbase in Bagram, then by air to the American base in Incirlik (Turkey), and then to the base in Pristina (or to Rumania, Georgia, Germany, and other countries) (see: I.N. Komissina, "Nezakonnoe proizvodstvo narkotikov v Afganistane," *Problemy natsionalnoy strategii*, No. 1, 2010, pp. 33-34).

⁵ See: A.A. Kniazev, "O narkokriminalnom komponente sovremennykh politicheskikh protsessov v stranakh Tsentralnoy Azii v kontekste afghanskogo narkoproizvodstva," *Informatsionno-analiticheskiy portal Materik*, 24 March, 2010, available at [<http://www.materik.ru/>]; *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2010. Summary Findings*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, New York, September 2010, p. 1; A.H. Cordesman, *The Afghan Narcotics Industry: Extended Summary*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 12 November, 2009, p. 10.

Diagram 2

**Areas under Opium Poppy in Afghanistan
in 1994-2012, hectares**



of 2009, opium stockpiles in Afghanistan and neighboring countries totaled some 12,000 tons, equivalent to 2.5 years of global illicit demand for opiates.⁶

The very limited possibilities of the Afghan government to maintain security in the country and make adequate and correct social, economic, and management decisions is another major headache.

- First, the Hamid Karzai government does not control the larger part of the country,⁷ where power belongs to former warlords turned self-appointed governors independent of Kabul and relying on their mini-armies. Many of them are involved in the narco-business; some of them side with the Taliban. It seems that the current haggling between the U.S. representatives and the Taliban is explained by the extremely weak power of President Karzai and his Cabinet.
- Second, widescale falsifications at the 2009 presidential and 2010 parliamentary elections cast doubt on the legitimacy of Karzai's presidency: both campaigns showed that Afghanistan does not have a strong central government.

Both campaigns demonstrated beyond doubt that the final aim of the counterterrorist coalition in Afghanistan as formulated by the United States, viz. a democratic centralized state, was unattainable for several reasons.

⁶ *International Narcotics Control Board. 2010 Report*, New York, January 2011, p. 96.

⁷ According to information made public in December 2008 at a London conference of the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS), in the previous 12 months the Taliban spread its permanent presence to 72 percent of Afghanistan, up from 54 percent in November 2007 (see: [http://www.icosgroup.net/2009/media/media-press-releases/eight_years_after_911/]).

- First, it contradicts the country's traditions; as such it stirs up discontent and widens the gap between the elites and among ethnicities.
- Second, the last three decades of unrest and radical decentralization have aggravated the problems.

This explains why American experts have become champions of the idea of a state of “decentralized democracy”⁸ or the idea of “internal mixed sovereignty”⁹; all other conditions fulfilled, either could have been acceptable to the United States.¹⁰

Experts, who are fully aware that “decentralized democracy” or “internal mixed sovereignty” will create many problems, cannot think of a better political future for Afghanistan.¹¹

The majority of the most influential non-Pashtun politicians are ready to accept the idea of decentralized governance; they refer to the problems that are rapidly piling up in the relations between the Pashtuns and other ethnicities. They want elected governors and proportional representation in the central power structures.¹²

They are probably right; however, proportional representation of all ethnicities in the central power structures will hardly resolve the problem created by the relations among the three largest ethnic groups—the Pashtuns, Hazaras, and Tajiks. The country might become less governable. Zamir Kabulov has rightly pointed out that today Afghanistan needs “a strong central government” and that “any attempt to place the stakes on ethnic contradictions is fraught with catastrophic repercussions for Afghan statehood and regional stability.”¹³

⁸ The central government retains its responsibility for foreign policy, domestic security and democratic “rules of the game” on a countrywide scale; the regions are becoming more independent, which gives them the opportunity to use the already existing base of legitimacy and identity; the local administration should be elected and should be transparent.

⁹ Mixed sovereignty is an even more decentralized model. This approach would take many powers that are now held in Kabul and delegate them to the provincial or district level. Mixed sovereignty would grant local authorities the additional power to rule without transparency or elections if they so choose—as long as they do not cross the three “redlines” imposed by the center. The first redline would forbid local authorities from allowing their territories to be used in ways that violate the foreign policy of the state. The second would bar local administrations from infringing on the rights of neighboring provinces or districts. The third would prevent officials from engaging in large-scale theft, narcotics trafficking, or the exploitation of state-owned natural resources.

¹⁰ These variants would preserve a central state with autonomous regions and democratic institutions and with the power and incentive to deny the use of Afghan territory for destabilizing Pakistan or planning attacks against the United States and its allies.

¹¹ A decentralized democracy in Afghanistan would face three critical challenges. The first, of course, is the Taliban, who oppose democracy in principle and are likely to resist this approach as aggressively as they now resist centralized democracy. The second challenge is the limited administrative capacity of the Afghan state. Third, the country's malign power brokers would likely resist such an option. A transparent electoral democracy would threaten their status, authority, and ability to profit from corruption and abuse. The “internal mixed sovereignty” will create even more problems. First, governors would be free to adopt regressive social policies and abuse human rights. Second, corruption would also be prevalent—indeed, for prospective governors, the opportunity for graft would be an essential part of the system's appeal. Third, the central government would have to strike a bargain with the country's power brokers, requiring them to refrain from large-scale abuses in exchange for tolerance of moderate local corruption and a share of foreign assistance. Even this kind of bargain, however, would probably be resisted by the country's strongmen, who have grown used to operating without restraint (see: S. Biddle, C. Fotini, A. Thier, “Defining Success in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Affairs*, No. 4, 2010).

¹² Ahmad Wali Massoud, brother of late Ahmad Shah Massoud, spoke about that in June 2011 at a conference on Scenarios for Afghanistan and Regional Security Transformation held in Almaty. He was supported by Aziz Arianfar, Director of the German-based Center for Afghanistan Studies (see: “Afghanistano nuzhen status neytralnoy strany pod egidoy OON,” RIA Novosti, 11 June, 2011, available at [<http://www.rian.ru>]; Aziz Arianfar: “Edinstvenny vykhod iz tupika—vernut Afghanistano neytralitet,” International Information Agency Ferghana, 20 June, 2011, available at [<http://www.ferghananews.com/>]).

¹³ See: Zamir Kabulov: “Nuzhno idti v Afghanistan s otkrytym serdtsem,” Information portal Afghanistan.Ru, 25 May, 2011, available at [<http://www.afghanistan.ru/>].

There is another problem: recently the relations between President Karzai and the political leaders of the United States and the NATO member countries have been going from bad to worse. The shifted accents in future state governance are probably explained by the growing mistrust of the Karzai regime, which proved unable (or unwilling) to check outrageous corruption and abuse of power at all levels and the president's obvious determination to shake off American and NATO patronage.

In 2011 this became even more obvious; in March Hamid Karzai demanded that the U.S. and NATO stop the military operation immediately; late in May he accused the American commanders of killing peaceful citizens. He said that if airstrikes on settlements continued, the foreign troops would be declared enemies of the Afghans people.

On 18 June, 2011, speaking at an international youth conference in Kabul, Hamid Karzai "belittled the US-led coalition as unwelcome outsiders who invaded Afghanistan for their own interests and who pollute the country's environment" and added that he no longer felt grateful to the military coalition. "The occupation troops have already damaged the ecology of Afghanistan beyond repair; we will live with these effects for the next forty to fifty years."

The president said that he doubted the aim of international aid under which the countries involved in the coalition were building schools, roads, and hospitals in his country: "They are building these roads not for us but for their huge trucks with huge wheels."

The next day, outgoing U.S. Ambassador in Kabul Lt. General Karl Eikenberry retorted that the American side was prepared to revise its relations with the government of Afghanistan and reminded everyone that the Americans had paid dearly for their help to this country.¹⁴ He was indignant: "When we hear ourselves being called occupiers and worse, our pride is offended and we begin to lose our inspiration to carry on."¹⁵

The U.S. Senate arrived at a similar conclusion: the report of the Committee on Foreign Relations said that \$18.8 billion had created no efficient state institutions in Afghanistan but "raised expectations and changed incentive structures among Afghans." It described the impressive increase in funding for civilian programs in Afghanistan ("Congress appropriated approximately \$2.8 billion in FY 2009 and \$4.2 billion in FY 2010 funds for Afghanistan") as excessive. The Senate pointed out that the funding should be cut by 22 percent to keep within the planned trimming of the budget deficit.

The senators recommended the following:

- Set up an efficient mechanism of interdepartmental and intergovernmental coordination of humanitarian activities in Afghanistan;
- "We must challenge the assumption that our stabilization programs in their current form necessarily contribute to stability";
- "Our aid projects need to focus more on sustainability so that Afghans can absorb our programs when donor funds recede."¹⁶

"Rather than trying to strengthen the Karzai government, the real strategy is to return to the historical principles of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan: alliance with indigenous forces."¹⁷

¹⁴ The report of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations says that between 2002 and 2010 the United States extended aid totaling \$51,803 billion to Afghanistan; \$18.78 billion were poured into the economy, the social sphere, and state institutions; \$32.89 billion were spent on setting up and training the Afghan national army and the police; \$127.5 million, on anti-narcotics efforts (see: *Evaluating U.S. Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan. A Majority Staff Report, Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 8 June, 2011*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 2011, p. 34).

¹⁵ [<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/robert-gates-confirms-us-peace-talks-with-taliban/story-e6frg6so-1226078756876>].

¹⁶ *Evaluating U.S. Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan*, pp. 1-2, 5, 29-30.

¹⁷ G. Friedman, "The 30-Year War in Afghanistan," *Stratfor* (US), 29 June, 2010. In mid-March 2010, a secret meeting was held in the White House to discuss how to proceed with the Afghan Taliban. In recent years the United States has been

It should be said that today this model, its faults notwithstanding, looks much more adequate than centralized democracy.

In mid-June 2011, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates officially confirmed the fact of talks with the Taliban from which the Karzai government was excluded. He also admitted: “My own view is that real reconciliation talks are not likely to be able to make any substantive headway until at least this winter”; he was dead set against a hasty pullout from Afghanistan: “I think the Taliban have to feel themselves under military pressure, and begin to believe they can’t win before they’re willing to have a serious conversation.”¹⁸

It seems that Karzai is of the same opinion; contrary to what the United States hopes to achieve, i.e. to split the movement, he is determined to share power with the leaders of the resistance.¹⁹

He knows that placing the stakes on the “moderate” Taliban is doomed to failure, therefore he prefers to talk to the leaders, warlords, and respected regional politicians. Leaks in the Western press testify to the fact that the president of Afghanistan is talking to Mullah Omar, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Jalaluddin Haqqani.

In June 2011, Karzai admitted, “Earlier this year we had several meetings with members of the Taliban. The talks have been launched and are going on smoothly.” He added that he talked to influential warlords and the leaders officially empowered to speak in the name of the movement.²⁰

In 2012 and early 2013, neither the U.S. nor Karzai made any secret of their talks with the Taliban. Karzai, in turn, accused the Americans of “talking to the enemies” and offered to show the right way out.

In many respects he is right; aside from the fairly doubtful terminology, it must be admitted that the “moderate” Taliban is driven not so much by ideological, rather than by material considerations. This means that the “moderate” members have no impact on the nature of the armed struggle against the government and cannot affect the movement’s future; therefore, the leaders and influential warlords are the only valid dialog partners. The dialog itself should be limited to their possible involvement in the political process, the results of which are fairly vague. Later, they could very well be offered high posts in state structures.

The Taliban is prepared to lay down arms and start talking if:

- The Constitution is changed;
- The foreign troops are withdrawn;
- The Taliban is accepted as part of the country’s political system;
- Its offices are opened in the cities of Afghanistan;
- The names of its leaders are removed from the “black list” of the UN SC;
- All imprisoned members of the Taliban are set free;
- Elections are controlled by a neutral interim government.

The question is how acceptable is all this to the U.S., NATO, and the Karzai regime?

more and more frequently talking about a dialog with those of the Taliban members who were not involved in crimes; who laid down arms and recognized the Constitution, in short “moderate” members. Judging by the leaks in foreign press these talks are underway with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as active brokers. So far there have been no results (see: K. Belianinov, A. Gabuev, “Esli vrag ne sdaetsia, ego ugovarivaiut,” *Kommersant*, 17 March, 2010; V. Skosyrev, “Obama podderzhal peregovory s ‘Talibanom’,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 17 March, 2010).

¹⁸ [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13830750>]; [<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/robert-gates-confirms-us-peace-talks-with-taliban/story-e6frg6so-1226078756876>].

¹⁹ Talking to journalists in his residence in Kabul, Karzai said: “I again call on my brothers, the Taliban, dears, Hizb-i-Islami to take this opportunity and say yes to the call of the people. This is a rare chance.” He addressed those who lived in emigration and who fought in Afghanistan to come back and establish peace for the sake of their country’s prosperity and stability (see: [<http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2010/06/04/jirgas-offer-rare-chance-taliban-karzai>]; “Karzai pozval bratiev-Talibov na ‘Loya jirga/Bolshoy sovet’,” BaltInfo Agency, 28 November, 2009, available at [<http://www.baltinfo.ru/>]).

²⁰ See: A. Reutov, “Talibov otdelili ot ‘Al-Qaeda’,” *Kommersant*, 20 June, 2011.

Some of the demands may be fulfilled in due course, while the main point—the pullout of foreign troops—is unacceptable. Washington has other strategic designs, while Karzai remains in power thanks to the foreign troops. If the coalition which, in fact, has never achieved its initial aims, decides to promptly leave the country, Afghanistan will be left to the mercy of the Taliban with unpredictable repercussions.

- First, no one knows who the “moderate Taliban” is and what the Taliban’s real face looks like today.
- Second, it is impossible to guess whether a dialog with the Taliban will prove effective with respect to the country’s political future.
- Third, so far, no one knows how the leaders of the ethnicities in the country’s north and along the Iranian border will respond to the talks. Elbowed out of power, they might start another round of civil war fraught with disintegration into ethnic regions.

The Afghan Factor in the Regional Security System

For many years, the Afghan factor has remained one of the key threats and security challenges. This is explained by the socioeconomic and political development of Afghanistan (especially as the main terrain of drug production and terrorist training) and by the “geopolitical games” in which the country (and, most important, the fighters camping in its territory) hold a special place and have a very special role to play.

What external threats and challenges to regional security are real today²¹ and which ones will become exacerbated after the coalition’s pullout?

The main one is the new international security system built by the United States and based on the “dual standards” policy applied in disregard of the U.N. SC.

It is growing more and more real, while the list of countries and regimes which fail to fit in is growing longer. In the new system, decision-making is subjective; this means that none of the Central Asian countries can hope to avoid being listed. Today, however, the geopolitical heavyweights do not need destabilization in the Central Asian region.

The strategy and tactics the coalition is pursuing in Afghanistan, its pullout plans, and all sorts of geopolitical projects devised in Washington cannot but cause doubts. Indeed, Afghanistan is seen as an American foothold in the region, which makes the Central Asian region vitally important for America.²²

Strange as it may seem, Washington is not at all concerned about the interests of Russia, China, India, or the regional states, which means that practical implementation will not go smoothly.

The increasingly fierce struggle over natural resources, in which military force is used as the main argument, is another big problem of the contemporary world. More and more often the developed countries rely on military-political means to deal with their internal economic problems.

Central Asia is no exception: the power centers are locked in a struggle over access to the region’s resources (oil and gas in particular) and transportation routes. This is the beginning and end of geopolitics in Central Asia today and in the near future.

²¹ Here I will not discuss the internal threats and challenges to regional security, even though they dominate today; after 2014 the larger part of them will become even more dangerous. At the same time, the internal threats and challenges are only indirectly connected to what is going on in Afghanistan and the future pullout.

²² Here I have in mind the concept which lumps together the Afghan and Pakistani problems in the so-called AfPak and Greater Central Asia strategy.

Nothing is being done to remedy the situation that caused the world financial and economic crisis of 2007-2008. This is the third problem. The mounting budget deficit of the United States, the economic recession in the eurozone, and the rising external debts of the developed countries might create another financial bubble and, therefore, another crisis, probably in late 2013-mid-2014, according to certain experts.

The chaos in the Middle East is the fourth problem, which has already invigorated the radical Islamist movements by supplying them with plenty of weapons, human resources, and money. Their increased pressure on secular regimes will not be limited to North Africa and the Middle East; extremist groups will spread far and wide beyond the region.

This means that Central Asia might become one of their targets. Today, the rapid increase in radical, extremist, and religiously motivated extremist acts in practically all the Central Asian countries can be described as a clear warning. Western analytical centers of all sorts have opted for a highly dangerous variant: regime change in the Muslim countries and reliance on political Islam.²³ The experiment tested in the Maghreb countries, the social and political parameters of which are very close to those of the Central Asian countries, failed.

The threats and challenges emanating from Afghanistan in the context of the coalition's pullout constitute the fifth problem.

I can see three real threats.

- First, the national armed forces of Afghanistan will be unable to ensure security inside the country; therefore, a civil war with pronounced ethnic accents cannot be excluded.
- Second, small opposition groups (Uzbek, Uyghur, Chechen, Kyrgyz, etc.) from Russia and Central Asia that camp in Afghanistan have been demonstrating much more vigor than before. They will inevitably be pushed out of Afghanistan back to their places of origin; I have in mind the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Aqramiyya, Tablighi Jamaat, the Islamic Party of Eastern Turkestan, Jamaat of Central Asian Mujahedeen, and others.

Russian expert Dina Malysheva has rightly pointed out that the migration of fighters "might encourage members of the local religious-political movements to join forces with armed fighters from Afghanistan" while "disunited armed clashes might develop into guerrilla warfare."²⁴

- Third, the problem of transit of Afghan drugs has not been resolved. Narco-transit has brought together criminal groups, some of the members of the defense and security structures, and certain politicians in Russia and Central Asia; the number of drug users is steadily rising in practically all the countries of the region.

Neither the regional states nor the international organizations involved in ensuring security can cope with the problem. This means that Afghanistan as a drug producer relies on an influential lobby; the same can be said about Central Asia as one of the transit corridors.

The Afghan Problem and the SCO

The possible involvement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Afghan settlement and related threats and challenges are being actively discussed. The idea is promising and realizable—un-

²³ Information about a new structure set up at the U.S. Department of State to deal with religious communities in other countries is highly illustrative in this respect.

²⁴ D. Malysheva, *Tsentralnoaziatskiy uzel mirovoy politiki*, IMEMO RAN, Moscow, 2010, p. 13.

der certain conditions. The question is: How can the SCO help Afghanistan; What would be better avoided so as not to mar the Organization's positive image?

Experts suggest the following.

- First, funding social and infrastructural projects in Afghanistan; this is possible but hardly realizable today: the SCO still lacks a unified mechanism for funding economic projects and an institution capable of setting such a mechanism in motion. This means that the SCO member countries should set up a corresponding structure and tune up the mechanism for creating and spending its budget.
- Second, the SCO should help fight the narco-business in Afghanistan up to and including control along its borders. It should be said that the SCO has no power to fight narco-traffic inside Afghanistan; however, the problem can be resolved up to a certain point.

There are several vicious circles. First, it is impossible to seal off the borders of Afghanistan for drug trafficking without cooperation with Pakistan and Iran, while comprehensive cooperation with them is impossible since they are not full-fledged SCO members.

The second circle: the SCO members cannot agree on the level of threats. Some of them (Russia, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan) are worried about drug trafficking from Afghanistan; others have other concerns. China, for example, is not troubled by the flow of drugs from Afghanistan.

The third circle: there are groups in each of the SCO member countries determined to preserve the status quo by all means; this makes border control practically impossible. The solution is simple enough: supplies of precursors to Afghanistan, from the SCO countries in particular, should be discontinued.²⁵

- Third, the SCO may try to organize a dialog inside the country under its aegis, yet practical implementation is hardly possible. For various reasons, the Taliban does not accept Russia (despite the fact that the political leaders of Afghanistan have somewhat readjusted their attitude to it) or China and will never talk to them, partly because the SCO member countries are fighting Islamic extremism, the ideology of the Taliban.

Iran and Pakistan (so far outside the SCO) stand a good chance of mediating a dialogue with the Taliban.

The Afghan government is too weak to talk to the Taliban from a position of strength, the only language the Taliban understands. The international coalition would be extremely naive to expect that the sides could find a common language.

- Fourth, some experts, General Leonid Ivashev being one of them, suggest that the U.S. military contingent in Afghanistan should be completely or partially (minus the NATO forces stationed in the country) replaced by SCO collective forces. This is a good,²⁶ but obviously premature, idea: the SCO is not prepared for military involvement in Afghanistan.
 - First, the Afghans have learned to look at all foreign military in their territory as occupiers who violate the state's sovereignty and cause a lot of casualties.

²⁵ There is information that precursors come from China, Pakistan, India, Europe, and the Middle East on a regular basis. The Bakiev clan controlled the flow of drug trafficking across Kyrgyzstan, this is one of the most pertinent examples of how top politicians in Central Asia patronized the narco-business (see: K. Fayzullina, "Ekonomika narkotrafika opiatov cherez Tsentralnuiu Aziiu," Internet portal Islam in CIS, 9 August, 2013, available at [<http://www.islamsng.com/>]).

²⁶ See: "Perspektivy rossiisko-natovskogo sotrudnichestva po 'afghanskomu voprosu'," Internet portal Afghanistan.Ru, 10 March, 2008, available at [<http://www.afghanistan.ru>].

- Second, Russia has learned its lesson from its own attempt to send troops into Afghanistan: the Afghans will never accept foreign military presence in their country and no modern social order can be enforced on them.
- Third, the SCO has not acquired a full-fledged military component, while its potential is fairly limited. The SCO cannot replace NATO in Afghanistan; it can join others in the struggle against threats and challenges generated in this country.
- And, finally, before drawing the SCO into Afghanistan, its potential involvement should be discussed with the government of Hamid Karzai (or the next president) and the leaders of the United States and NATO.

There are several, though purely hypothetical, variants of the SCO's involvement in Afghanistan:

- (1) An independent mechanism of involvement parallel to NATO, the U.N., the EU, and other Western structures.
- (2) Cooperation with these structures in the areas where they cannot cope.
- (3) The same or similar functions (minus the military component) performed by Western structures in the rest of the country.
- (4) One or several multinational brigades patterned on those already functioning in the country to restore the provinces.
 - The first variant is absolutely unrealistic for two reasons: the SCO cannot, while the West will not, allow it to do this.
 - The second is unwelcome: the SCO should not become a stopgap for NATO.
 - The third and fourth variants are more practicable with the exception of use of force by the SCO. Their practical realization, however, is limited for the reasons described above.

To sum up: the SCO's potential involvement in Afghanistan is fairly limited; so far, it can do much more by keeping to the present scheme of bilateral cooperation between the SCO member countries and Afghanistan.

As an organization, the SCO can and should create a favorable foreign policy environment for Afghanistan, discontinue or, at least, cut down the export of drugs from it and import of precursors into it, reduce as far as possible external funding of the opposition inside the country, extend economic assistance to Kabul, and check the spread of radical Islamist ideas. This does not require the consent of the government of Afghanistan or, more importantly, the ISAF commanders. The political will of the SCO member countries will suffice.

To promote economic settlement, the SCO should concentrate on investments and proceed from a specific plan of economic rehabilitation of Afghanistan rather than from the amount of money allocated for this purpose (which is being done today).

To overcome the security threats, the SCO member countries should proceed from principles very different from those accepted by the United States and the European Union. They are:

- (1) Non-use of force.
- (2) Equal cooperation and partnership in the economic sphere between Afghanistan and the SCO members.
- (3) Economic contacts designed to deal with the social problems by setting up (restoring) infrastructure on a commercial basis.

- (4) Humanitarian aid limited to cultural and educational programs and targeted at specific structures.
- (5) Commercial projects implemented at the level of heads of tribes and territories with support (albeit pretty formal) of the central government.
- (6) Cooperation of the sides in the economic, cultural, and social sphere should be aimed at establishing a peaceful and efficient economy; this will allow the people and tribal chiefs to abandon drug production for the sake of legal and creative economic activities.

To be able to follow these principles, the SCO countries should organize a buffer zone along their borders free from drug production and terrorist training camps.

Conclusion

It would be wrong or even stupid to underestimate the impact of Problem-2014 on the situation in Central Asia and regional security. The coalition's pullout will create complications inside Afghanistan. The situation will become more explosive and less predictable especially if, according to what is being said today, the foreign military contingent pulls out in haste leaving behind half-baked national security forces, whose ability to ensure security looks doubtful, to say the least.

From this it follows that the country's future promises no joy: the Taliban will return to power (to make it even less efficient than today), while squabbles among warlords and ethnic groups will gradually push them toward another round of a civil war with strong ethnic accents and possible disintegration.

There is no Northern Alliance to stop the northward progress of any warfare; this means that Central Asia (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and, possibly, Uzbekistan in particular) will have their share of troubles. The only force that is so far keeping Islamism in check will be pulling out of the region to leave the secular regimes to face the mounting impact of the Islamists.

Terrorist groups of radical Islamists from Central Asian countries so far based in Afghanistan might cross the border into their home countries. They constitute the main threat to security and stability. Our information about their numerical strength, structure, and aims is very limited, however the danger their radical Islamist ideology presents to the Central Asian secular political regimes is very real indeed.

None of the Central Asian countries can cope with the threat on their own; they should start working on an adequate response today, although what it might look like is anybody's guess. It is obviously impossible to formulate it without Russia and, possibly, China.

Increased drug transit across Central Asia is the second serious threat. It is unrelated to Problem-2014, but the problem is unlikely to disappear along with the foreign troops. Despite the numerous programs and newly established structures, nothing has been done so far to address the problem in earnest. This means that the Afghan narco barons are not alone: preserving the status quo suits the organized criminal groups operating in Central Asia and Russia.

Problem-2014 is either unrelated or partly related to other security threats. This makes us wonder who is profiting from "demonizing" this date? Why do the media (the Western media in particular) insist that the Western pullout will be followed by an explosion in Central Asia?

Indeed, we all know that the pullout will not be complete and final: the United States, which has been fighting in Afghanistan for twelve years and has paid dearly for the war (up to and including lives of its own citizens), is not just going to up and leave the country. The absurdity of this is obvious: complete pullout would spell complete failure of America's regional strategy.

Two questions suggest one answer: the carefully fanned hysterics are needed to justify Washington's resolution to preserve its position in Afghanistan and, possibly, in some of the Central Asian countries.

Today, Afghanistan is the key springboard for launching a direct or indirect impact on Central Eurasia and China (by definition zones of the U.S.'s vitally important interests). The current "horrors" make this even easier and allow the use of other instruments, Islamism being one of them.

Real threats and real challenges are found inside, rather than outside, the region, in each of the Central Asian states. Everyone interested in regional security should concentrate on these threats and challenges—they are not new and are unconnected with Problem-2014—yet they can be described as dominating.

I have demonstrated above that the SCO's potential involvement in the settlement of the Afghan problem is limited by its limited resources; much of what it could have done should have been done long ago, and regardless of Problem-2014. In the meantime, essentially nothing has changed, which suggests that there is no agreement among the SCO member countries on what the threats and challenges really are and that there are strong lobbies in each of them that want to preserve the status quo. A sad conclusion indeed.
