

# The Afghan Mirror of World Policy

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International Institute for Global Analyses

Vision & Global Trends. International Institute for Global Analyses  
Piazza dei Navigatori 22, 00147 – Rome (Italy)  
Seminar Publications Series – N. 01/2021 – May - ISSN 2704-8969

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First Edition: May 2021

Seminar Publications Series – N. 01/2021

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*Paper for the Conference "Central Asia's security problems in the context of the continuation of the Afghan conflict", St. Petersburg, 22 April 2021.*

It is a little bit uncomfortable for me to address this public today. In front of such outstanding experts of Afghanistan, I can hardly qualify myself as such. Nevertheless, having followed for years the international situation surrounding the conflict in the country, I will strive my best to bring a European perspective to the debates.

First of all, let me consider the US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan from the standpoint of the system of international relations. Coming after twenty years of unsuccessful attempts to transform the country according to their liberal-democratic model, the retreat indicates that the United States are finally giving up the pretension to position itself as the hegemon of the international system. Washington *de facto* recognizes that there are precise limits to its military power, and therefore, to the possibility to influence the development of events on a global scale, especially when it comes to changing cultures and domestic policy of other countries.<sup>2</sup> This is a very important turn and I would say is the most significant moment of the events we are debating today.

Apart from this, the withdrawal is consistent with the posture that Washington has been obliged to assume towards the region as a consequence of its impotence to change things within it. This posture, there for over ten years at least, is characterized by a deep lack of vision and perspectives regarding the future of the country where troops were sent in 2001. Confirming a decision taken by the Trump administration, Joe Biden is coherent with orientations he already expressed during his vice presidency with Obama, when he opposed the troop surge launched in 2009.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, as previous speakers have already stated, the formal departure is by no means the end of the Afghan war. It marks rather the start of a new phase, coming after the one characterized by the straight American intervention. Afghanistan is a battlefield since 1979.

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<sup>2</sup> This evident truth is recognized also in the same capital of the "empire". See for instance: Greg Jaffe, *Following withdrawal announcement, battle to determine Afghanistan war's legacy begins*, "The Washington Post", April 14, 2021; [https://washingtonpost.com/national-security/afghanistan-war-legacy-us-military/2021/04/13/a2f4bf70-9c7c-11eb-8005-bffc3a39f6d3\\_story.html?mc\\_cid=e332cd60dc&mc\\_eid=f2875670f9](https://washingtonpost.com/national-security/afghanistan-war-legacy-us-military/2021/04/13/a2f4bf70-9c7c-11eb-8005-bffc3a39f6d3_story.html?mc_cid=e332cd60dc&mc_eid=f2875670f9)

<sup>3</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, *Exit Strategy. There will be no power-sharing, no reconciliation, no peace of the brave*, April 14, 2021; [https://theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/04/exit-strategy/618590/?mc\\_cid=e332cd60dc&mc\\_eid=f2875670f9](https://theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/04/exit-strategy/618590/?mc_cid=e332cd60dc&mc_eid=f2875670f9)

In the first phase, the US and the West acted as the instigator of hostilities throughout the 1980s. Then, they forgot about a conflict they had contributed for some five years. Next, the US tried again to influence events in the country supporting in connection with Pakistan the Taliban's takeover of power in Kabul. After 11-9 events, Washington abruptly imposed to international life a new order of the day, the "war on terror", declared Afghanistan being the main basis of the global enemy and started the direct intervention which is now ending in failure.

What's next? As stated, it is difficult to foresee a total withdrawal of the US military machine from the country. Indeed, the American global strategy is operating a global re-positioning that is set to take form over the next several years. The new posture will focus on what is now called the Indo-Pacific Theater, where a line of strategic confrontation with China will be implemented. At the same time, the US will continue to provoke Russia, partially on the assumption that constant pressure will in the end yield an accommodation of Moscow to the US interests. Against such a global strategy, the US should reduce their direct engagement in what they see as the Greater Middle East, encompassing Afghanistan, in order to demonstrate military resolve in other hot spots in Eastern Europe and the Pacific Far East. Altogether, it would make no sense to completely abandon such an important strategic location as Afghanistan, providing possibilities to disturb all the main geopolitical adversaries of Washington.

Consequently, following their declarative withdrawal, most likely the United States will retain several military basing facilities and non-military forces on the ground to continue to exert strategic influence in Afghanistan and in the region as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

Within a similar scenario, Afghanistan will serve the United States as a platform for attempts to play one against another its rivals, directly against Iran, indirectly Russia against China and also India against Pakistan, the whole to prevent the alignment of other forces in formats that are not in favor of American interests. At issue, there will be maneuvers such as to create among the mentioned powers contradictory perceptions regarding the relative gains of power and influence which the fluid Afghan situation may create for the different actors having a stake on the terrain.

A typical example may be seen in the attempts that the United States have already made more than once to create some kind of "Asian NATO", presented to local players as a way to cope with increased security challenges fed by the degenerating situation in Afghanistan. A step in this direction is probably to be seen in the working visit to Uzbekistan by a Pentagon delegation, led by the Deputy Chief of the Strategic Planning and Policy Directorate of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), Brigadier General Duke Pirak, performed in early April 2021. On the same line, Washington may play the increasing Turkish military presence in the region, for which Tashkent is again the main local counterpart as the recent signatory of a military-technical cooperation agreement with Ankara.<sup>5</sup> For sure, the role that Turkey will play

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<sup>4</sup> According to official Pentagon's data, contractors on the Afghan ground are already now See: Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in the USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility, [https://acq.osd.mil/log/ps/.CENTCOM\\_reports.html/FY21\\_2Q\\_5A\\_Apr2021.pdf](https://acq.osd.mil/log/ps/.CENTCOM_reports.html/FY21_2Q_5A_Apr2021.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Joint exercises are held in accordance with this agreement and its foreseen on the development of military and between Uzbekistan and Turkey. See: Узбекско-турецкие военные учения стартовали на полигоне «Термез»,

in the scenarios following the formal US withdrawal from Afghanistan should be closely observed to grasp the strategic line of Washington in the region.

Faced with similar developments, the major powers having traditionally a stake on the Afghan field as Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan and India – without forgetting the Central Asian republics, among which Uzbekistan has raised its potential as an autonomous player - will further intensify competition so as not to lose their influence within the country.<sup>6</sup>

Moscow and Beijing have all to lose from a new degeneration of the security situation in Afghanistan. Even more in a moment when they have invested considerable resources in improving connectivity projects across the region, in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative of China. At the same time, if confronted with new acts of confrontation from the US, the two Eurasian power will be obliged to deceive and counteract the Western presence on the terrain instead of build constructive interaction to stabilize the situation in the country.

Overall, Iran would have something to benefit from the new situation. Teheran sees the retreat (even if only symbolic) of the Western forces from Afghanistan as a victory of its position. However, in practical terms, the strategic denial of Iran's interests that the United States will continue to apply will force as well Tehran to act rather as a spoiler than as a contributor in the future scenarios of Afghanistan reconstruction.

In such a situation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) appears on the paper as an important framework for the stabilization of Afghanistan. Indeed, the SCO enumerated as members all of Afghanistan's neighbors (with Iran as an observers) and maintains an autonomous anti-terrorist structure based in Tashkent.

As such, the SCO would be the exact antidote against the policy pursued by the United States in Afghanistan and Central Asia, based on the exclusion of the key players having a stake in regional affairs. Instead, the organization could serve as a political platform for conflict resolution and provide political and economic support to the Afghan government. Moreover, if it will be engaged on the terrain as a collective actor, the SCO could propose the EU and NATO to cooperate in the creation of an infrastructure for peace based on a negotiation between all the Afghan parties and the provision of the needed assistance to the national security forces to keep the situation under control.<sup>7</sup>

However, the SCO potential geopolitical significance is undermined by the lack of operational institutional mechanism (and the fact that Iran lacks full membership).

All in all, I agree with the position expressed before by Sultan Akimbekov: the situation will be very difficult. The main regional actors will act in the context of a zero-sum game. In these conditions, the powers are not interested in stabilizing the situation inside Afghanistan, because of fear that a strengthened state will act against their position. Rather, each of them will tend to keep funding some of the internal Afghan factions thus contributing in maintaining the internal fragmentation of the country. In the end, the people of Afghanistan will continue to suffer from this state of things.

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близ афганской границы 23.03.2021; <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20210323/uzbekskie-i-turetskie-voennye-provodyat-ucheniya-na-granitse-s-afganistanom-17899014.html>

<sup>6</sup> Махмуд Гиёсов Шерали Ризоён Интересы внешних игроков в Афганистане в новых условиях, 03.07.2020; <https://cacds.org.ua/?p=9385>

<sup>7</sup> Vielmini F. (2012), *The SCO-Central Asian dimension of the Afghan crisis on the eve of ISAF retreat*, ISPI Analysis, No.132, July; [https://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Analysis\\_132\\_2012.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Analysis_132_2012.pdf)

I would like to spend some words also on the position of the Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan hereinafter referred to as the CAR) in the new situation.

Overall, anxiety is dominating the outlook of the countries of the region in front of the new developments. As soon as the pandemic restrictions will be lifted, the region will face a re-activation of the activities of transnational criminal groups in terms of trafficking of drugs, weapons and other valuable materials.

At the same time, the CARs expect a resumption of the activities of domestic insurgent groups having a foothold on the territory of Afghanistan. The two threats are organically linked. Both are fed by the general penetration of practices of corruption across the public sectors of the CARs.

Approaching a new crisis, a new fact in regional policy is the changed position and increased possibilities of Uzbekistan, a country that has created certain leverages of influence on the geopolitical situation of Afghanistan and has removed elements of confrontation with the neighbors. To play a positive role, however, Tashkent should be able to play a delicate balancing act between the powers trying to entice its politicians towards their side.

### ***Conclusions and Recommendations***

- We note with regret that the Western countries, even after two decades of unsuccessful intervention in Afghanistan and having endured significant costs for this, are still far from learning the lesson. There is no sigh of self-criticism of the philosophy of Western interventionism, even though that this has led to a succession of destructive consequences for international security with regards to countries as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, etc.

- This is particularly true for a secondary player like the Italian Republic, which followed the Western adventurism in Afghanistan without having a proper vision. What kind of gain the country received from this? The war didn't make sense to the Italians but they pay a very high price for it, losing the lives of more than 50 soldiers and wasting several billion euros.

- In the case of Afghanistan, the Western responsibility for chaos and destruction is particularly blatant since it dates back 40 years ago when the US, UK and France armed the Afghan mujahideen warlords thus creating much of the problems that are afflicting the country.

In order not to lose completely face and maintain a stake in the future of Afghanistan, the EU (especially since the UK is not a member anymore) would better think to create a joint platform for cooperation with the SCO (with or without NATO) in support of security in and around the country.

For the future, there is a need for a serious revision of the mechanisms of European assistance to Central Asia and Afghanistan.

One may ask the question to what extent it is advisable to spend a significant part of the financial assistance to support non-governmental organizations in the region as a whole. These structures absorb a consistent part of the aid often without delivering effective and sustainable results. In some cases, their action may be detrimental creating barriers to the implementation of central government policies.

The EU, together with the OSCE, spent billions to support the functioning of the borders between Afghanistan and Central Asia. This effort should be maintained paying increased and

due attention to the activities of transnational criminal groups that are involved in the illegal circulation of drugs and other valuable materials.

In doing this however, there is a need to make additional efforts to evaluate how money is spent and understand who are the recipients of the aid. Creating formal institutional structures at the border in support of recipients exclusively selected by central governments can be counterproductive because it may marginalize and alienate local communities thus pushing them towards the traffickers and insurgents.<sup>8</sup>

Again, as correctly observed during our works, Europeans should stop to think that their “universal” logic can be applied to local conditions with their complexities and local segmentations in ethnic, religious and territorial terms.

Lastly, facing a renewed wave of instability from Afghanistan, the CARs should seriously consider that it is time to proceed and reducing the mechanisms of corruption that are still widespread across their political lives and public sectors.

- CA governments should also recall that what they call “terrorism” for many of their citizens is often a last resort method to make a living (if not the only available source of income) and to resist the abuses that local administration inflicts to marginal communities.

- In an environment ripe for corruption with scant rule of law, local leaders and law enforcement bodies become prone to strike opaque agreements with opposing political groups and criminal syndicates. These relationships create an environment conducive to the spread of extremism, which, in turn, opens up serious prospects for the collapse of the state.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, one can ask to what extent Afghanistan is the main problem for the security of the region. As noted by an attentive observer of the country as Barnett Rubin almost thirty years ago Afghanistan is rather a mirror of the conditions of world politics, the crossroads of all its tensions and a field for manipulation by its major powers. Only a change in this overarching structure will finally bring about peace in this affected country.

*“The people of one of the poorest countries in the world successfully resisted a superpower. They had to fight for their lives in a world system imposed on them by others. If the situation in Afghanistan is ugly today, it is not because the people of Afghanistan are ugly. Afghanistan is not only the mirror of the Afghans; it is the mirror of the world.”<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Levi-Sanchez S. (2017), *The Afghan-Central Asia Borderland: the State and Local Leaders*, London: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Omelicheva and Markowitz, (2019), *Webs of corruption: trafficking and terrorism in Central Asia*, New York: Columbia University Press

<sup>10</sup> Barnett R. Rubin (2002), *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press.





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