



**ReSeT**

RESEARCH ON SECURITY AND TRANSNATIONAL GOVERNANCE  
INVESTIGACIÓN SOBRE SEGURIDAD Y GOBERNANZA TRANSNACIONAL

# THE AMERICAN WITHDRAWAL

GEOPOLITICAL CHANGE  
IN AFGHANISTAN AND  
CENTRAL ASIA AFTER 2014

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# // ABOUT RESET AND PUBLISHING

RESET (Research on Security and Transnational Governance) is an international think tank based in Madrid but with researchers and departments in eight different countries, including RESET UK, which is based in Cambridge. Our research focuses on issues related to global security, development cooperation and natural resource management. We aim to offer new, transnational and effective solutions to the challenges of international relations in the 21st century.

If you are interested in publishing any of the following articles, either partially or in their entirety, or in material based on them, written in Spanish or English, please address the contact below to negotiate the conditions:

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## // INTRODUCTION

The withdrawal of most United States combat troops from Afghanistan in 2014 not only is an important symbolic moment for Washington's foreign policy which will effectively close the book on the post-9/11 "War on Terror", it will also have major repercussions on Afghanistan and its neighbours in Central Asia. The void that Western forces leave behind is likely to be filled by more local-centred interests and other major international players such as China and Russia. Afghanistan has always been a geopolitical battleground, and the 21st Century will prove no different. The extraction and transport of natural resources, zones of influence, religious and ethnic strife, concerns about local terrorism and its proximity to other geostrategic hot-spots such as Iran and Pakistan- all combined with a lack of internal sovereignty- means that Afghanistan is unlikely to escape the clutches of external meddling.

RESET has written a series of articles by its experts on what the post-withdrawal future will bring for the most important national actors involved, and on how this will affect international relations during the coming decade. Through one article per country, we will analyse the impact that the new Afghan situation will have on:

- **Afghanistan** (Carmen Alonso Villaseñor): The conflict in the Central Asian country is a prime example of the complexities involved in New Wars. The inability of the superpowers to understand and address them has historically led to defeat in the arid mountains of this country. Beyond the particular failed policies of the consecutive invaders, Afghanistan represents the inaptitude of the international system of states to deal with modern challenges.
- **Pakistan** (Balder Hageraats): Afghanistan's future is intimately linked with that of Pakistan because of cross border identities and interests. Both countries' complicated and ambiguous relationships with the US will become even more strained after 2014, and Islamabad will shift its focus towards Beijing and other local players. The West is likely to be marginalised in this process, and may need to shift its focus back to India.
- **Iran** (Ricard Boscar): Despite mainstream thought in policy and security circles in the West, Iran could play an important role in the stability of Afghanistan and the region. Teheran has enough resources, ranging from cultural to economic assets, to cast its influence eastwards. How Iran decides to use them is linked to the future arrangement of interests in the region and depends on the US stance towards the ayatollahs' regime.

- **Russia** (Alberto Pérez Vadillo): The American withdrawal will force Moscow to recalibrate its policy towards Afghanistan and across the region. Much of what Russia can achieve depends on its relations towards the various Central Asian states. Regarding this, Moscow's room to maneuver will be constrained by both the presence Washington chooses to preserve and Beijing's ambitions.
- **China** (Carmen Alonso Villaseñor): The growing weight of China in international geopolitics has gotten to a point of no return. But the new superpower is still reluctant to assume the responsibility and burden that its position implies. Beijing's economic diplomacy is already strong, but to secure its interests, China will have to adjust its foreign policy, and Afghanistan after 2014 will be an important test of this.
- **The United States** (Balder Hageraats): The United States, after licking its wounds from two unwinnable wars and economic crisis, will need to scale back its global ambitions, and particularly those in Central Asia, where it will no longer be able to compete with other more local competitors. Washington policy will focus on specific goals, such as national resources security, rather than maintaining its more expansive agenda of the last decade.



Officers of the Afghanistan National Police (ANP) take cover from the mid-day sun as they guard the office of the Governor of the Bamyan Province (2009 / UN Photo - Eric Kanalstein)

## // AFGHANISTAN AFTER 2014: THE CHALLENGE OF A NEW PARADIGM

*Carmen Alonso Villaseñor*

In 2014 the United States plans to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. This movement is the last stage of yet another failed foreign intervention in the country, and poses many questions about the future stability in the whole region. But the main problem to settle is the inability of the international community to deal with the Afghan reality. If a new conflict is to be avoided, it will be essential to design a different approach to deal with the country, based on a deeper understanding of the context and its dynamics.

### A LONG STANDING CONFLICT

The conflict in Afghanistan is a continuum rather than fragmented periods of violence prompted by foreign invasions. From the times of the Great Game between the British and Russian empire in Central Asia in the 19th Century, to the NATO invasion of the country in 2001, the element that has remained present in all the consecutive episodes of war or conflict has been the clash between the modernizing elites of Kabul –usually supported by external allies– and the traditional rural authorities.

Since the second half of the 19th Century, successive leaders in Afghanistan tried to create a modern state in the country. From Amir Abdul Rahman Kahn to Amanullah Kahn, the attempts to consolidate the central power of Kabul while keeping under control the centrifugal forces of tribal Afghanistan and to introduce social reforms –such as the secular education or the recognition of rights for women– have met fierce opposition by local authorities.

When the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was founded in 1978, the new elites governing in Kabul tried to implement a Marxist-Leninist agenda that included the secularization of the State, and the emancipation of women. The majority of the population opposed the new regime, and to guarantee the survival of its allied government, the Soviet Union invaded the country in 1979. This was the beginning of a nine-year war against a segmented and scattered enemy: the mujahideen.

Afghanistan is a country scarcely uniform and with weak cohesion. Ethnically and tribally divided, the only uniting force of its society besides its common past is religion, which shapes its identity. Indeed, during the Soviet invasion, the insurgents united under the Seven Party Mujahideen Alliance, whose main purpose was the fight against the atheist communists and defend Islam in the country. However, shortly after the fall of the communist government and the Peshawar Accord that established the Islamic State of Afghanistan in 1992, the partnership started to fragment, giving way to a new civil war that concluded with the installation of the Taliban regime. Even though religion is capable of uniting Afghan society against a common enemy, it seems unable to maintain cohesion when there is no shared adversary.

*Historically, the conflict in Afghanistan has been a continuum marked by the clash between the modernizing elites in Kabul and the traditional rural authorities*

When the Americans invaded Afghanistan in 2001 there was no realistic plan for rebuilding the country after the defeat of the Taliban. The main aim of the invasion was to dismantle the Al Qaeda bases in the country through the fall of its supporting regime. After this objective was met, a counterinsurgency method was chosen as the best way to impede Al Qaeda returning to the country, and the US started a strategy of state building. Whereas the core target (Al Qaeda) was quite limited, the approach was too wide.

One of the main mistakes was to set up a strong and centralized government in Kabul, with the hope to avoid disintegration of the country as had happened in the Balkans some years before. This approach was misguided; it boosted tensions in a traditionally decentralized nation like Afghanistan. The introduction of Western-style democratic and centralized institutions caused resistance from local and traditional authorities. Even among reformist sectors in Afghan society,

the strong U.S. support of a corrupt and incompetent government in Kabul raised doubts about the sincerity of the democratization discourse of the coalition.

Operation Enduring Freedom achieved a quick and convincing military success in a matter of weeks, it toppled the Taliban regime and by the end of 2001, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was established with a new interim government. And yet, during years that followed, the Taliban reorganized as an insurgent force, making the American success teeter.

Apart from the inefficiency of the American strategy to achieve its own objective, wider questions remain. Why does Afghanistan seem unable to modernize and integrate in the international society in a peaceful way? Do superpowers have the legitimacy and duty to transform the whole of Afghan society in order to integrate it into the liberal and economically developed world?

These questions are more than an exercise in philosophical reflection. These are practical problems to consider before designing strategies to deal with the aftermath of the American withdrawal in 2014. Most of the global powers and countries with interests in Afghanistan have a genuine stake in its stability. But ideas on how to guarantee such stability are lacking, and require new approaches.

## **AND AFTER 2014: LEARNING TO DEAL WITH THE NEW COMPLEXITIES**

When international society intervenes (through military, development projects, humanitarian assistance) in a country in order to alter its regime, economic system or promote development and/or democracy, there is a teleological vision behind it. Mainly, that, outside of the developed world, there are countries that have remained stuck in earlier stages of development and that need reforms and assistance to move forward and reach the liberal system. This discourse legitimizes foreign intervention; even though intervention could have been prompted by more prosaic reasons, there is some kind of moral righteousness in this line of thought, as it will help the poor or other types of victims of such a backward system reach their deterministic potential.

Unfortunately, the realities of Afghanistan defy this vision. Afghanistan has been often described as a society locked in medievalism, but apparently all

attempts to modernize the country have been virulently contested by the local factions. It is not to say that the Afghan society as a whole opposes modernity and development, but rather that in Afghanistan there is an alternative system to liberal democracy that has succeed in guaranteeing its own survival, and that is unlikely to be removed, at least for now. Authors such as Mark Duffield have written extensively about emerging political complexes, and Afghanistan's situation seems to fit this kind of analysis perfectly

It is interesting to note that this system, despite its archaic tendencies, has shown to be capable of adapting to- and making the most out of- the new dynamics that globalization has brought to its lands. The decentralization tendencies in Afghanistan, for example, have been reinforced by this trend. The growing strength of global networks has posed insuperable difficulties to the nation-state's competence, and yet, these same networks have strengthened the local centers of authority.

The new trans-border shadow economies which have proliferated around the world fueled by improved communication systems are not able to depend on the formal –and legal- economy, so have also reinforced this competing system. The Taliban and other insurgents have benefited from the parallel trade that has grown in the region, both of legal and illegal goods. This economy has also proved to be able to transcend zones of war and peace thus gaining even more relevance.

When the Americans withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014 they will leave behind a central government with very few tools to confront this challenging emergent political system. This system will not only compete with the Kabul government, but will also pose a risk to the stability that most of the states involved in the “Afghan question” are seeking, at least as long as they cannot find ways to interact with it. The looming (greater) instability in Afghanistan will not come from an insurgence aimed at replacing Kabul's current regime, but rather from a system that questions the deepest notion of the territorial state and that feels

*Instability will likely come from a system that questions the deepest notion of the territorial state and that feels comfortable exerting a decentralized authority on the fringes of the liberal international system*

comfortable exerting a decentralized authority on the fringes of the liberal international system.

Given that there is some degree of consensus between the powers involved with the future of Afghanistan, the best option of the international community to deal with the Afghan complexity –and indeed with the emergent complexities that our globalized world is bringing- is to understand this new paradigm. Those countries that manage to feel most comfortable dealing with non state actors and to develop tools to manage new global networks and dynamics are the most probable winners in the new international environment ■

## // PAKISTAN: A NEW ERA OF OPPORTUNITIES

*Balder Hageraats*

If any foreign country, besides the United States, has had a direct influence on the war that has been raging in Afghanistan since 2002, it is Pakistan. Islamabad's interests in Afghanistan are diverse and muddled, and very much depend on the different types of internal Pakistani actors that one analyses. Pakistan's political elite is mostly pessimistic about its main foreign policy goals with respect to its neighbour: internal stability, influence on the government in Kabul and limited influence by its eternal rival, India. 2014 and the announced US withdrawal is seen as an opportunity to readdress these issues and no longer depend on the ambiguity of Western policy.

It is no coincidence that the United States government has a special envoy- a position held by Marc Grossman until late last year- for Afghanistan and Pakistan combined. In many ways, the war in Afghanistan has also been a war in Pakistan, albeit one mostly limited to the mountainous north-east of the country. The porous borders, cross-border tribal allegiances, smuggling routes and economic interests have made it often difficult to distinguish where the Taliban or other local groups were based. The fact that Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was eventually found in Pakistan (Abbottabad, exactly in the north-east) surprised no one. US drone attacks seem to have crossed the border into Pakistan with relative ease, and not always coordinated with Pakistan security forces.

It is this latter issue- problematic coordination and asymmetric interests between Western and Pakistani security forces- that has made the Afghan war so complex from Pakistan's perspective. Forced to be allies against Taliban and

other disruptive forces, Islamabad and Washington never managed to truly come to an agreement about their differing agendas. Islamabad has been highly suspicious of Western interests, especially in relationship to the Pakistani-Indian conflict. Washington has never truly trusted the internal workings of Pakistan's political elites, suspecting cooperation with radical Islamic groups, including the Taliban and Al Qaeda itself.

This American concern is not unwarranted. Even if Pakistan's political elite have been more open to cooperation with Washington than they admit, there is no doubt that Pakistan has faced a difficult juggling act. Not overly alienating the US meant going against internal pressures, which demand support for local groups that often are closely linked to the Taliban. The result has been a situation of covert cooperation with intermittent displays of resistance to Western policy. In order to remain both relevant abroad and at home, it has been a continual play between anti-US symbolism and pro-US pragmatism. This has often led to moments of great tension between the two temporary and reluctant allies.

Facing its own inherent political instability at home, Pakistan's situation has not been enviable during the Afghan war. Without any true peace or understanding with India, fighting another front so close to home has made internal stabilization efforts nearly impossible. Even if the conflict in Kashmir has been put on halt- largely in response to the Afghan situation- Islamabad has felt besieged from various angles. Its geopolitical allies are preciously few: with Russia there are economic ties, and with China political common goals, as well as concern for local terrorism, but no strong or permanent alliances. As a result, Islamabad has had little choice than to accept a certain degree of US involvement in its internal workings. Without it, Pakistan's leadership would not have been able to withstand more dangerous pressures to its existence, both from outside and from within.

For a nuclear power with strong anti-western segments among its population this has not been an easy process. The result has been a forced and unhappy marriage in a fight against an elusive enemy. During this time, Islamabad's policy towards the conflict has been mostly on an ad-hoc basis, with few clearly

*Islamabad's anti-US symbolism and pro-US pragmatism has often led to moments of great tension between the US and Pakistan, two temporary and reluctant allies*

specified objectives beyond its long-term goals in Afghanistan: stability, influence in Kabul and its provinces, and limiting Indian influence in those places. Both sides are now hoping that 2014 will change the dynamics into a more business-like arrangement, normalising the complexity from the past decade or so. This has already allowed Pakistan's security and foreign policy to slowly start returning to the general goals mentioned above.

## **STABILITY IN AFGHANISTAN**

Instability in Afghanistan means instability in Pakistan, at least in the border regions. Internal Pakistani opposition as well as local militia and other armed groups have been able to use the local chaos by moving freely in-between the two nations, using this freedom to strengthen their powerbases. Economic, cultural and religious dynamics between Afghanistan's south and Pakistan's north-east are often inseparable, meaning that if one is in flux, so is the other. One of the most important consequences of this has been the difficulty in fighting local terrorist and rebel groups, and it is in this area that Pakistan is increasingly looking towards China for support and cooperation. Not only do they have directly shared interests in Afghanistan, but both also benefit from information sharing and resource support at a more regional level.

US presence in Afghanistan is increasingly seen as disruptive rather than conducive to local stability, and its failure to eradicate the Taliban (whose numbers are estimated to be back to 2003 levels) mean that its withdrawal is welcomed and perceived as a chance to change tack. Combined US - Pakistani security operations are likely to change in nature, focusing on very specific goals to deal with local problems- including drug trafficking, the search for specific insurgents or terrorists, and intelligence gathering- rather than forming part of a wider, destabilizing war.

## **PAKISTANI INFLUENCE IN AFGHANISTAN**

Beyond stability, Islamabad craves influence in Afghanistan's politics. So far, its success in achieving this goal has been limited at best. The ambiguous relationships that both Islamabad as well as Kabul maintain with local and provincial actors, combined with Kabul's perceived vassal status with respect to Washington, has led to mutual distrust and only troubled cooperation between

the two neighbours. Pakistan's allies within Afghanistan have not been those in centralised power positions, something that Islamabad is bent on changing. Increasingly concerned with India's growth as a regional superpower, and understanding that its relationships with China and Russia are dependent on specific shared goals, Pakistan needs regional leverage. Afghanistan, both because of its cultural and historic ties as well as its geographic position is a top priority.

## INDIAN INFLUENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

There is no doubt that India's position in the world, unburdened by internal instability like Pakistan's, has been strengthened over the past decades. With only China being an obvious obstacle to its regional ambitions, India's rivalry with Pakistan is quickly becoming more symbolic than real from the southern side's perspective. That, however, is not the case from Pakistan's perspective. Pakistan still views its stance towards India as the pillar of its foreign and security policy. India's recent economic and political advances towards Kabul- mostly as part of its development cooperation policy- are seen as adding insult to injury: Afghanistan is Pakistan's backyard, or so Islamabad's reasoning goes. New Delhi's ability to influence post-2014 negotiations and settlements is of grave concern to its rival's political elites. In this regard, Pakistan's ability to still exert influence on the US and China to try to limit India's involvement will be crucial for its success in influencing Afghanistan's future.

*India's recent economic and political advances towards Kabul worry Islamabad*

Pakistan has been on the losing side of the war in Afghanistan. Perhaps not in military terms- as it had no direct involvement- but certainly geopolitically. It has exacerbated its internal strife and reduced its regional influence. Islamabad is banking on a new dawn after 2014. Peace settlements and renewed diplomatic options, or so the thinking goes, will open the door to regional stability and influence by Islamabad. Yet this is by no means a given. It is unclear what will happen to the political situation in Kabul, whether it will exert sufficient influence over Afghanistan's decentralised provinces, and what stance other local and global actors like India and China will take. Nonetheless, Pakistan has little to lose and a lot to gain from a Western withdrawal. Just like most actors involved in the conflict ■

## // IRAN: TEHERAN'S EASTERN VECTOR AND ITS POTENTIAL

*Ricard Boscar Gracia*

In May 2012 the US and the Afghan governments signed a long-term Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) by which Kabul will rely on US support in assuming control of the country's security, as the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) draws to an end in 2014. However, the 11-year-old mission has not met its key objectives, while the allied forces have also failed to realistically assess the broad dynamics of the region and addressed the needs and interests of the local actors involved. Most notable is the lack of understanding with respect to Iran, a country that holds an essential role in determining what will become of Afghanistan in the post-NATO future, as it can either become a major spoiler or a reliable peacebuilding actor.

### INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE

Caught up between a paralyzing 30-year-long dispute with the US and a rivalry with Saudi Arabia within the Islamic Umma, Iran is under a great deal of pressure. In the West, it's often portrayed as an international security threat and as an example of uncompromising anti-Western Islamism. Numerous officials –from the US and allied countries- openly argue for regime change in Teheran, and warmongers have monopolized the debate repeatedly calling for military action.

Despite some political turmoil during 2009, Iran has managed to successfully maintain its geopolitical stand. While having negative economic effects, international pressure over Iran's nuclear program –viewed by Iranians as a double standard- seem to be reinforcing the regime's defiance. Moreover,

although Washington has deployed more than 125,000 troops around Iran's borders, Teheran's influence has been steadily growing both East and West.

In the Muslim world, Iran is striving to become a point of reference in opposition to the Sunni Wahhabism exported by Saudi Arabia, and this rivalry is notably palpable in Afghanistan, where both countries have had an influential role over the years. While the Saudis are responsible for inspiring (and financing) the Taliban, growing Iranian influence in Afghanistan has recently exposed the difficulty of managing security without Teheran's cooperation.

### PERSIAN INFLUENCE

Afghanistan and Iran share not only a 1,000 km-long border, but also economic interests and historical, linguistic and cultural values. There are at least twenty percent of Afghans who adhere to the Shia branch of Islam, mainly the Hazara minority, and around forty percent of the population are Dari/Persian speakers. Since the fall of the Taliban, Iran has managed to extend its influence in Afghan political life through these minorities who hold representatives in the Afghan Parliament. Furthermore, some estimate that Iran is spending hundreds of millions of dollars in media and civil society projects, including schools, religious centres, universities and other reconstruction efforts. A few TV channels, like Tamadon, as well as newspaper Ensaf, openly defend Teheran's positions.

Karzai's government normalised relations with Iran, although there are some significant disagreements over issues like water, drug trafficking and the million-strong Afghan refugees on Iran's soil. The refugee problem is an important source of tension between both countries, and it's being used by Teheran as a bargaining chip over the SPA and further US influence in Afghanistan, which Iranians see as a direct threat. Kabul, for its part, accuses Teheran of discriminating its citizens, backed by numerous reports of such incidents. US officials have been repeatedly complaining about Iran's meddling in Afghan affairs, particularly in arming and training Taliban units to carry out attacks against the coalition's forces.

*Growing Iranian influence in Afghanistan has recently exposed the difficulty of managing security without Teheran's cooperation*

Iran and the Taliban have established some strategic ties during recent years, despite former clashes in the wake of the 2001 invasion, when Iran was supporting the Tajik anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. However, contacts between the Taliban and Iran's military units probably represent a smaller fraction of Iran's influence in Afghanistan. Teheran is prioritizing financial channels over the military one –which seems limited to small-scale operations-, and it's not interested in strengthening its former enemy to the point where it becomes a real force able to take complete control of the country.

In any case, the extent of Iranian influence in the neighbouring country is still being discussed, and there are some voices from the security community that underrate it. But the fact is Iran has at least two important factors on its side in Afghanistan: time and space. Teheran is going to make the best of any scenario that comes to be, even if it is an increase in violence or instability, with significantly less resources than countries like Saudi Arabia, whose financial and spiritual aid to the radical Islamists can end up backfiring, or the US and its NATO allies, who spend huge amounts of resources to sustain their missions.

## REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

An overlooked but vital issue in the region is economic development. Steps taken in this direction will have positive effects on security. Both Iran and Afghanistan are in need of boosting their trade and financial situations, as both hold crippled economies: the former due to US-sponsored sanctions and the latter because of its poverty and lack of statebuilding capabilities. Iran is a vital partner for Kabul, its main oil supplier and responsible of around fifty percent of total Afghan trade.

Iran is also interested in Afghan stability as it is situated in the middle of important energy supply lines that link central Asia to China and India. Iran desperately needs access to these markets, mainly for oil transport to China, while land-locked Afghanistan needs a safe route to the sea in order to boost its trade. At the moment, this sea route is being contended between ports in Pakistan –the preferable option in economic terms, and Iran's recently improved Chabahar port, an option supported by India.

Finally, recent prospects have shown that Afghanistan has significant potential for the extraction industry. Its mountainous terrain holds large ore deposits of rare metals that are sought after in the global high-tech markets.

## POST-NATO FUTURE

For the coming years, Afghanistan will continue to be a playground for major international actors, and its stability will reflect on the level of compromise achieved among them. As NATO's mission ends, and considering the fragility of the Afghan state, other players are going to take steps as none of them wants to see an out-of-control Afghanistan. In that sense, Washington's policy in the region will determine largely what's going to happen, and if Iran's stakes are ignored, we're likely to see a scenario of increasing violence.

The worst scenario looming in the near future is that which contemplates a US armed conflict against Iran, which would have serious effects worldwide, especially in the Middle East and Central Asia. In spite of Washington's complaints, Iran is a country that holds a greater degree of democratic practice than its neighbours and it has repeatedly expressed its willingness to hold a normalized dialogue with the US. Iran's potential as an ally in economic and security terms is unquestionable. A change of policy is needed towards Teheran pointing out the contradictions of the current US-Saudi alliance. It may be necessary that more moderate leaders reach power in Teheran, but it still seems unlikely to be enough without an American approach.

Regardless of internal politics, Iran will keep trying to reinforce relations with other countries like Russia and China. Despite not being a part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), it closely follows developments within this regional framework and has repeatedly expressed its will to become a part of it. It would be in China's and Russia's interest to assume a larger share of responsibility in managing security after 2014, and they would count on Iran's contribution.

*Washington's policy in the region will determine largely what is going to happen, and if Iran's stakes are ignored, a scenario of increasing violence is likely*

In terms of security, it is going to be very difficult to sustain an efficient Afghan National Army with only the help of military advisers and security corporations. It seems to be also dangerous to render Pakistan as Afghanistan's main security sponsor. Pakistan double-sided relationship with the Taliban has proven to be fickle, to say the least, and the country is far from being politically stable.

Any security improvement needs to be based on a more nuanced approach to the different regional actors, acknowledging each one's interests in Afghanistan and implementing an economic strategy that can bring real options to the local population. If there is no policy change in the region and no balanced power share between the regional actors, the conflicting interests at stake will become an impossible puzzle to solve, and the country will remain war-stricken for more years to come.

As NATO's senior allied commander in Afghanistan General John R. Allen commented on placating violence in Afghanistan: "Iran could do more if they chose to". But then, why would they? ■

## // RUSSIA: COMPETING FROM WEAKNESS

*Alberto Pérez Vadillo*

Currently, as in the main capitals of the world, in Moscow there is an intense debate ongoing about the future of Central Asia after the planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014. Against this background, Russian president Vladimir Putin said on 1 Aug 2012 that it was “regrettable that countries who are participating in operations in Afghanistan are thinking about how to pull out of there”, and added that since NATO “took up the burden, should carry it to the end”. These statements were made during the president’s visit to the Russian town of Ulyanovsk, where NATO requested the use of facilities at an airport for its mission in Afghanistan, something the Kremlin has granted for the sake of “the national interest”. Putin’s words express much of Russia’s outlook on the forthcoming situation post 2014: after over a decade of conflict in Afghanistan and significant American involvement in the region, a major review of Moscow’s strategy for the deeply complex space of Central Asia is a given, yet more time to prepare is really needed.

It is often said that Central Asia is the crossroads of the world, a place of great strategic significance. This statement is especially true in the case of Russia. Over the centuries, the territory comprising modern day Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has been a main vector of Russian expansion and foreign policy. Today’s Central Asia and the system it forms with Afghanistan is far from being stable, but Moscow needs to cast its influence there if it is to guarantee its security and geopolitical interests. In the competition between regional and world powers to gain sway over both Afghanistan and the states of broader Central Asia, everything boils down to what they have to offer to the region. In other words: the would-be godfather who brings the most

attractive gift in terms of security and economic support gets the biggest piece of the cake. Unfortunately for Russia, it faces here a dilemma it is familiar with: its capabilities do not match its geopolitical ambitions.

Although economic issues, especially related to energy, are relevant, security is the most central factor in shaping Russia's foreign policy towards the region. In this regard, three important questions arise. After 2014, what government will be in Kabul? How big will be the presence, if any, of the US in Afghanistan and in other Central Asian states? What will be China's move? Certainly, much of the Russian success in portraying itself as a trustworthy and capable gendarme in the region depends on these.

### DEALING WITH POST-NATO AFGHANISTAN

What happens in post-occupation Afghanistan is important for its own sake. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the threefold threat of terrorism, drug trade and arms trafficking stemming from Afghanistan continue to destabilize Central Asia and, to a lesser extent, Russia itself. A good proof of this were the bombings in Tashkent in 1999 and subsequent incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) into Kyrgyzstan from bases in Tajikistan and Afghanistan in 1999 and 2000. The main concern is whether Afghanistan would return to its former role as a safe haven of terrorists after the US pulls out. It is likely that a moderate faction of the Taliban finally makes its way back to the government. Whether this eventually implies a menace to Kabul's northern neighbours only will be known in the future. However, it is certain that there will be a complex, and maybe violent, process of internal adjustment between political forces. Two important issues deserve consideration here. On the one hand, the position that ethnically Tajik and Uzbek factions, traditionally opposed to the Taliban, eventually hold in the power balance is important for the stability of the country and the region. Moscow might seek to somehow back them directly or through proxy states in Central Asia. On the other hand, Putin will have to decide what type of government he is willing to tolerate in Afghanistan. In this regard, there is a wide range of attitudes between acceptance and denial, and this depends on how much of Russia's budget – tight in comparison to others, particularly China's – is allocated to reconstruct the

*Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, terrorism, drug trade and arms trafficking stemming from Afghanistan destabilized Central Asia and, to a lesser extent, Russia itself*

country. It seems unlikely, however, that Moscow will return to its former non-recognition of governments with Taliban components, since that is most likely an unavoidable reality.

## WOOLING THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

Central Asian states will have a major influence in the determination of Russia's new Afghanistan policy, as well as of its geopolitical objectives. Therefore, how Moscow relates to the security complex of Central Asia is of vital consideration for the analysis. In the wake of the terrorism events mentioned above, Putin sought to promote military and political integration in the area. Thus, in 2002 he managed to turn the 1992 Collective Security Treaty (CST), which binds together Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, into the more formal CST Organization (CSTO). This move was intended not only to fight terrorism, but also to obtain a geopolitical advantage in the region. However, strengthened integration under the CST in its later stage and CSTO was flawed, since during its inception many things were left to bilateral relations among members. For example, Russia, despite its rhetoric, did not have enough will or military capabilities to provide its partners with sufficient support in counterterrorism operations. Neither did it manage to ease border or other types of tensions between members –last June there was a serious shootout on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border over a trivial argument between workers. Besides, Central Asian states are often wary of Russian influence, and disagreements on how to approach Afghanistan were common under Taliban rule and still are. Therefore, after the 11th September attacks, when it was clear that the US was going to enter the region, Central Asian states welcomed the new partner. Afghanistan, again, was changing the picture. Facing this, Moscow had to adapt and undertake a policy shift.

Putin more or less managed to coordinate Russia's response with the Central Asian states and pledged limited but useful support to NATO, giving its consent to provide bases in CST territory and providing the allies with fundamental intelligence. With this movement, Putin paved the way to rapprochement and cooperation with the West, something he wished for since the beginning of his mandate. On the one hand, Russia and the other CSTO states could finally see how, at least temporarily, the Taliban were seriously weakened and deterred from casting a shadow up north through proxies like the IMU; in this sense, CSTO was partially a free-rider on NATO's efforts. On the other hand, cooperation with

Washington slowly paid off in other fronts over the last decade in both economic terms –Russia is likely to access the World Trade Organization- and security guarantees –NATO expansion and the restart of the American missile shield in Europe are off the table for now.

However, it is difficult to link these developments solely to Russian cooperation over Afghanistan, and American involvement in the region has also negatively affected Russian aspirations. Since NATO moved to Central Asia, the CSTO has been widely disregarded and dimmed as a “paper organization”; Uzbekistan, the most powerful state in the region, abandoned the organization this year much to Russia’s discontent. The America-led security architecture has supposed benefits for Central Asian states and improved relations among them, something Moscow could not provide. Most importantly, there is already evidence that the US plans to leave a significant presence there after it departs from Afghanistan. In this situation, the Central Asian states will continue to play their rent-seeking game, exploiting rivalry between Washington, Moscow and, maybe, Beijing. Here the declarations of the president of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, are very illustrative. Before he signed an agreement in October with Putin allowing Russian troops to stay in the country until 2042 –a vital support for the border security of the country after its civil war in the nineties-, he declared in a loud way: “[I have] a big file of requests by other countries who offer mountains of gold for having a military base in Tajikistan, but I haven’t even looked at those offers”. Tajikistan is seen as one of the main allies of Russia in the region.

*Central Asian states will have a major role in Russia’s planning of its new Afghanistan policy, as well as of its geopolitical objectives*

## **RUSSIA AND CHINA: THE INCOMING FIGHT FOR SUPERIORITY**

Not only American and Russian interests are going to collide in Central Asia, since China is likely to join the party as well, adding another front in Moscow’s battle for influence. Russia and China are formally members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, an organization mostly concerned with security, which also comprises all the Central Asian states but Turkmenistan. Apart from being able to issue anti-American statements on occasion and enable antiterrorist cooperation, this organization does not extend any guarantees that Russia and China will respect each others interests. As American superpower wanes, it is

likely that these two countries compete over regional hegemony. The Vostok military drills of 2010, which were undertaken from Altai to Vladivostok, were the biggest military exercises in post-Soviet Russia. They not only highlighted that its military is trying to adapt to regional war scenarios in Central Asia, but also that Russia intends to become the regional police –a Chinese delegation was duly invited to assist the events. Yet a show of force will not be enough if Moscow wants to consolidate its influence in the area; so far, it seems that after 2014 it will be difficult for Putin to have the upper-hand in the game of Central Asian geopolitics ■

## // CHINA: REDEFINING ITS ROLE

*Carmen Alonso Villaseñor*

In 2014 the US will withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, that will open a process of readjustment of power in Central Asia. Even though this region is an obvious sphere of potential influence for China, until now Beijing has not been willing to assume an active role in the security of these countries, and has concentrated in the diplomacy of investment. But the risk of instability that the withdrawal of the Americans from Afghanistan brings will force Beijing to take charge. It has too much to lose in a scenario of extremism and violence.

### THE NECESSITY OF A NEW STRATEGY

Besides protecting its economic interests, the main concern for China relating to the future of the Central Asian country is its own security, which could be threatened through its western borders. The separatist groups that are already operating in the Xinjiang region might get a boost as a result of a Taliban resurgence after the Americans leave Afghanistan.

Moreover, the return of the Taliban would lead to reinforced Islamic extremists and possibly a radicalization of Pakistan. Generally, the security situation in Afghanistan has a direct impact on international organized crime, drug traffic and ethnic conflict right on the frontiers of China.

As a result, the Chinese focus towards its neighbor has been realist: Beijing looks for a good relationship with the country, no matter who is ruling it. During the Cold War, China opposed the Russian invasion and armed the Mujahideen. Early after the American invasion in 2001, China re-opened the embassy in

Kabul and established diplomatic ties with Karzai's government. It has supported the country with financial aid (even if quite modestly) and, above all, investment. But China has refused to cooperate militarily, thus avoiding close links with the current government and the ISAF and consequently getting targeted by radicals.

But this does not mean that China is indifferent to the future of Afghanistan: radicalization clearly endangers Beijing's interests. Until now, its attitude with respect to the country and the western presence in it has been that of a free rider. It shares interest with the US in facilitating stability in the region, and in keeping the Taliban under control, but Beijing has not contributed beyond its economic investments. This is consistent with China's principles of non intervention in internal issues, but also with the belief that a military intervention in Afghanistan cannot lead to a victory, and that a negotiated peace settlement is the only way to stabilize the country.

*Radicalization and instability in Afghanistan will affect China in many ways, and that will force it to overcome the low profile that has been able to keep till now*

Now, however, with the withdrawal of US troops, the need for a new approach is obvious. The looming instability of the country will affect China in many ways, and this will force it to overcome the low profile that has been able to keep till now.

Even though the Asian country has signaled that it will not contribute to a \$4.1 billion fund for sustaining the Afghan Army after 2014, Beijing has offered to train a small number of Afghan soldiers. There has also been some political progress: the inclusion of Afghanistan as an observer member of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and the signing of the Strategic Partnership agreement between both countries. But so far the engagement has been mostly focused on investment, carried out by state owned Chinese firms, such as the major project in the copper mine at Mes Aynak, the exploration of oil and gas fields in Amu Darya and the construction of the first oil refinery in the country.

## PLAYING IN THE SHADOW

Between the options of staying out completely and attempting to directly control the situation in Afghanistan, the most likely scenario for China would be to play

the game in an indirect way, exerting its influence through alliances with key partners. This is an effective strategy that Beijing is already applying, but it has also some disadvantages: mainly the difficulty to find a trustworthy and stable partner. This weakness could be the Achilles' heel of China policy in Central Asia.

Russia is a key partner for China, a country with whom Beijing is already playing in tandem in multilateral security issues (i.e. Syria) and energy security. In Afghanistan there has already been some kind of cooperation through the inclusion of the country in the SCO, a forum that could play an important role in converging the efforts of both countries in Afghanistan.

However China-Russia alliance is an asymmetric relationship that could turn unstable over time. China means for Russia the guarantee of its international stance. Russia, however, is far less important to Beijing, even if Moscow cannot be underestimated when it comes to counterbalancing the West and Japan, or to natural resources issues. But the economic dominance of China in comparison with the stagnant Russia could lead to a perceived threat. If this can be avoided, their relationship is likely to grow closer over time.

The evolution of the Chinese relationship with Pakistan will also be crucial. Its privileged ties with the country could be used to influence the military in order to control the Taliban presence in some areas. However, there are serious doubts about the willingness and capability of Islamabad to do so.

China will support Pakistan, as it needs the country to stay strong in order to keep alive its conflict with India, and maintain the balance of power in South Asia. Also, China has vast economic interests in Pakistan, specially relating to the question of the energy supply: Pakistan is not an energy source for China, but an alternative route for oil supply, and this guarantees the latter the continuance of Chinese aid. However, the question of terrorism is also a center of gravity in their relationship, and the worsening of the situation in Afghanistan will lead Beijing to pressure Pakistan to contain its own extremists. If Pakistan doesn't manage to bring Beijing results, their relationship could be seriously damaged and the traditional alliance endangered.

Finally, Beijing cannot ignore the role of the Central Asian ex-soviet republics. Their importance in international geopolitics lies in their geographical situation, their supply of natural resources (specially energy) and their internal stability, which makes them more reliable allies for the superpowers than, say, Pakistan. China has already started economically involving these countries, but another kind of alliance cannot be rejected.

## FACTS ALWAYS PREVAIL

The change in the paradigm with the end of the hegemony of the US and the growing influence of new powers is already underway. But to guarantee that the process does not result in chaos and violence, the countries must adjust their policies to the new context. China should recognize that the privileged place in the international relations system that it is claiming will not only bring advantages, but also duties and liability. And it is not a matter of international responsibility or principles, but self interest that will force Beijing to come to this conclusion.

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In Afghanistan, Beijing will find the first acid test to the effectiveness of its foreign policy. China has already made clear that it does not aim to be a new superpower in the style of the US, with military presence all around the globe, and that it has no intention to interfere in the internal issues of other countries. But its economic interests span the whole planet, and to secure them Beijing will have to be more assertive, with all the consequences that that entails ■

## // THE UNITED STATES: NO OBJECTIVES, MANY CONSEQUENCES

*Balder Hageraats*

**T**he US withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan is set to be completed in 2014. It will by no means be a complete withdrawal, leaving at least 50,000 troops still without an exit strategy. It will, however, be highly symbolic of a war entering its final stages. Even though the Pentagon has declared an interest in maintaining a strong presence in the central Asian country for at least another ten years, it is likely that the events in 2014 will force an end-date for remaining troops as well. As such, it is a watershed moment in a war that has lasted for over a decade. It has been a war that has caused great loss of human life and resources, and yet has never had a clear set of objectives. In spite of that- or, rather, because of that- there is little doubt that the withdrawal represents a significant failure by the United States.

Now the US will need to redefine its relationship with Afghanistan. A less brazen, more modest approach with less ambitious agendas is the only sustainable option available to American and European capitals. The West will, more than ever since the Great Game, be competing with other regional and local actors, vying for influence, allies and resources. In combination with the war in Iraq, the violence in Afghanistan has shown significant weakness in Western expansionist dynamics, and the failure of foreign policy. Time is required to find a new identity based on the new, multipolar realities.

### **WITHDRAWAL AFTER AN AIMLESS WAR**

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan stems from economic necessity (no more funding), political necessity (no more domestic support) and a failure to

articulate its mission objectives. After the initial defeat of the Taliban in 2004, the war turned into an endless series of conflicts that every military occupier dreads: each individual battle could be won, but the war could not. Essentially it is a defeat by default.

The causes for the US war in Afghanistan are not to be found in the unforgiving mountains of Afghanistan, but in the almost as harsh offices of Washington, DC. After 9/11, there was no doubt that the United States needed to react to satisfy grieving public opinion at home. The Taliban, unequivocally supporting Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, made Afghanistan the obvious target. The two initial objectives- namely the hunting down of Osama bin Laden and removing the Taliban from power in Kabul- have been accomplished. The latter was never in doubt when the invasion began, very similar to removing Saddam Hussein from power in Baghdad.

Beyond that primal need to retaliate and hunt down Al Qaeda, the objectives for US presence in Afghanistan were never convincingly articulated. The resulting justifications for sustained military presence have been a mishmash of ad-hoc goals centred on democracy and stability.

The change in strategy in later years to hand over more responsibility to Afghan politicians and military stemmed from a mistaken view on societal development. From this almost Hegelian perspective, the required exercise was a discrete series of steps that eventually and inevitably would lead to a Western style democratic model. Within a context of the 1990s- a unipolar world with unstoppable Western expansion- this all made some sense. Yet despite sincere efforts, at least on some occasions, it turned out to be a Sisyphean task to model a nation and culture not inclined to accept the basic premises of Western ideals.

It was only after the war in Iraq and other failures of the War on Terror in general that the Afghan mission turned into a perceived problem in Washington. This was no different when Barack Obama took office and ordered a US troop surge to fight the Taliban. Beyond all the official discourse about Afghan necessities, the most important reason for the surge was domestic: the new administration

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could not be seen to be weak or afraid to use its military might after ending the war in Iraq.

This lack of real purpose does not mean that the war has had no consequences. First and foremost, it has created a decade of violence and instability in Afghanistan, leading to tens of thousands of fallen combatants on both sides, and at least as many civilian victims. From a US military perspective, the failures in central Asia mean the symbolic end of its Global War on Terror as well as the end of a unipolar world. It also signifies the end of many of the practical ambitions that the US had with respect to the region. Finally, at home, the costs of war and reconstruction on the other side of the world are very much noticeable. An already large gap in public financing has been exacerbated by the spiralling costs of foreign missions.

What remains are persistent systemic forces that make a complete withdrawal of formulated policy difficult: diplomatic connections, perceived prestige loss, and bureaucratic networks auto-sustaining themselves. Whereas Afghanistan was a fundamental pillar of US security policy for over a decade, now it has turned into a costly headache which Washington will need significant time to recover from.

## WHAT NEXT?

Last year the US passed the 2000 mark in terms of military casualties, and the costs of continuing the operation have become difficult to justify in the current economic climate. Even if special interest groups, spearheaded by the Pentagon, still wish Operation Enduring Freedom and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to continue, there is very little political will to make this happen. At most, and again comparable to failed attempts in Iraq, the administration might try to maintain a number of permanent bases to protect the allied Kabul regime and allow for counter strike operations against the Taliban.

Its fall from grace from the perceived omnipotent unipolar position the US occupied in world affairs- symbolized by the lack of success in its military conflicts but very much the result of deeper economic and geopolitical dynamics- means that Washington will have to scale down its ambitions. It has not been able to deliver democracy in Afghanistan or Iraq, nor create solid strategic partners in

these countries. Its future policies will belong to a very different world, a world in which it will need to compete with others for local resources, influence and cultural expansion. Democratization is no longer within reach. It might still be able to support allied regions, such as the area around Kabul or strike against specific Taliban or Al Qaeda operations, but nation-wide reconstruction through military dominance is no longer feasible. It never was.

As long as Karzai's government maintains formal sovereignty, however, the United States will still have an important advantage over rivals such as Russia, Iran or China. Especially if it can also maintain its shaky balance with the leadership of Pakistan and ex-Soviet Republics, Washington is likely to continue to play an important role in the economic and cultural development of central Asia.

Not only does Afghanistan's location mean it is right at the centre of various geopolitical rivalries, it is also increasingly important because of its untapped natural resources and oil and gas transport routes. Access to those resources and security of those routes will become more prevalent priorities. Success in this will largely depend on its ability to work together with potential local partners, including global rivals China and Russia.

It is exactly those two actors, Beijing and Moscow, together with Teheran, that will worry Washington the most. Ceding central Asia to them would not only be a blow to its declining image as the only truly global power, but also affect many of its wider strategies. Perhaps this is the true legacy of US failure in Afghanistan. Its Middle East policy, control of global resources, its relationship with India and cultural influence would all be affected.

The understanding of these major shifts in the local situation do not seem to have penetrated Washington circles just yet. Institutional lag and cultural influences put in question the US' ability to accept a more modest position among the ranks of nations. Unfortunately it is the only feasible way in which the country can continue to play a role of significance in regional (Asian) politics. Over the past decade, buoyed by the triumphant post-Cold War period, Washington severely overplayed its hand. Now it is forced to reassess its position in the world, and its

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position in Afghanistan. This can only be a good thing for the Americans and for the local populations. After all, it is hard to imagine things getting worse for either group. To all involved, this has been a war without objectives or purpose but with disastrous consequences ■