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AFGHANISTAN IN THE FORE OF WORLD POLITICS

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A MONTH after Russia came up with an initiative to hold an SCO-sponsored international conference on Afghanistan in Moscow on March 27, the U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, suggested to NATO's ministerial summit in early March that an international conference on Afghanistan (with Iran participating) should take place under the NATO-UN aegis on March 31.

When this article appears in print, both conferences will have been held. One wonders, however, what made the U.S. call for an international conference on Afghanistan with identical format, agenda, participants and even invitees (Iran and Turkmenistan as Afghanistan's direct neighbors)? More likely than not, it was compelled by the desire, on the one hand, to prevent Russia from establishing a foothold in the Afghan field, while, on the other, to avoid antagonizing Russia to an extent where it is likely to definitively wash its hands of any involvement in Afghan settlement.

On top of that, Afghanistan will go to the polls in presidential elections in August 2009 (for the second time in the history of the Islamic Republic). In March 2009, too, Russia and Afghanistan marked a symbolic date, 90 years of diplomatic relations between the two states. Thus, there is every reason to talk about both the preliminary results of yet another attempt to democratize Afghanistan and Russia's place in present-day international policies in connection with Afghanistan.

What are the results? The most widespread view among experts is that the U.S. project to democratize Afghanistan is in a profound, if not hopeless, crisis. Afghanistan itself, with much help from the U.S. and NATO, has become a threshold drug state, or possibly even a full-blown one in its own right.

Let us start with the Taliban, the determining factor in the current situation. According to statistics divulged at the December 28 London conference of the International Council on Security and Development (ICSD), the last twelve months saw the Taliban extend their permanent presence to 72% of the Afghan territory, whereas the figure for November 2007 was only 54%.¹ The ICSD's Paul Burton believes the

“political dynamics” in Afghanistan is determined precisely by the “progress of the Taliban.” In this connection, ICSD experts urged a “new strategy” to be drawn up in relation of Afghanistan that would make it possible to lead that country and its society back to the path of onward development. In the first place, what is the meaning of the Taliban being “permanently present” in 72% of the Afghan territory? A “permanent presence” is a sufficiently wide-ranging notion that can mean both partial or periodic control over the said territory and a mere presence of isolated extremist groups that pose as belonging to the Taliban, something that can even bring some occasional benefits in Afghanistan today.

Specifically, a UN Security Council delegation visited Afghanistan in late November 2008 to study the current situation. Representatives of 15 nations went to Kabul and Herat, and had meetings with Afghan politicians, NATO generals and Kabul-based foreign diplomats. In early December, the UN Security Council held a meeting on Afghanistan, to which the delegation made its report. The report said that power in Afghanistan belonged to its Government, and that rebel groups were concentrated in separate regions, where they in no way formed an alternative model of power despite attempts to create an illusion of their omnipresence.

This description of the current situation in Afghanistan seems to be the most accurate one. As an argument, let me refer to a report by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) that was made public on February 17 of this year.²

It should be said right away that its analysis cannot be called comforting since the case in point is more than 2,000 peaceful civilians who died in 2008. This is the highest indicator since 2001, when the Taliban regime was toppled. The number of civilian casualties increased by 40% on the previous year 2007 (2,118 as against 1,523 persons). What makes the difference is the make-up of the victims.

Fifty-five percent of the 2,118 (1,160) died at the hands of the Taliban and other extremist groups, with 85% thereof killed by terrorist attacks, mostly suicide bombers, car bombs, or self-made explosive devices. Last year and in 2009, the terrorists primarily targeted schools, particularly those for girls. Supporters of the regime, students, doctors, teachers, and (less frequently) police officers were assassinated, while engagements with army and police fighting squads were avoided.

Therefore, this question naturally suggests itself: What permanent Taliban presence in 72% of the territory is the ICSD referring to in this case and against this background? Is the case in point a military-political movement that openly confronts the central authorities and enjoys support of the local population? Or does it mean certain radical extremist groups that practice nothing but terror? While in the former case we should speak about the international project in Afghanistan being in a crisis, then in the latter, a profound, systemic crisis gripping Afghan society itself.

One cannot but agree with Mr. Paul Burton’s estimate about the Taliban determining the “political dynamics,” insofar as the current agenda is dominated by plans to wipe out the Taliban as a terrorist organization. This is correct and cannot be otherwise. Just one sulfurous acid attack against several female primary school-goers had much more repercussions than the Afghan army’s clearly emerging edge in the fight against terrorists.

It is also hard to disagree with the ICSD as a whole and its call for a “new strategy” in Afghanistan, since the current strategy is failing to secure the “ongoing

development” and a stepped-up success as its main condition. As is only natural, it is high time this strategy was altered.

As is obvious, the paradoxical nature of the current situation in Afghanistan is precisely in that the present authorities, though having no strong opponent either in the Taliban or in the ousted mujahiddin, have lately experienced what can be described, mildly speaking, as marked discomfort. The reason for that is unlikely to be, contrary to one fairly widespread view, the high level of corruption at all echelons of power or poor progress on social programs.

Where the corruption is concerned, it is endemic in Afghan society, and some “successful” struggles against this ill have been pursued for as long as Afghanistan is in existence. As for the social programs, the international community indeed has means of helping Afghanistan in this sense. And yet, one has to agree with claims that the failure to implement the social programs is rather the consequence of instability and insecurity, as well as of the weakness of the central authorities, than the cause thereof.

The causes that underlie the existing situation are of comprehensive nature, including, of course, the corruption and, to some greater extent, the absence of a leading party that could act as a consolidating political force. But the main reason is the weakness of Afghanistan’s national army and police, and, against this background, the clearly insufficient military presence of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and of the U.S. The active military presence of the antiterrorist force and of the ISAF is in its eighth year, while the situation is suddenly taking a turn “for the worse.” Why?

My country was also involved militarily in Afghanistan for eight years and finally became conscious that attempts to solve an internal conflict solely by force lacked any prospects. By announcing, in 1986, our pull-out, we made Kabul accept a “new strategy” in the shape of a policy of national reconciliation.

Conceptually, the situation at this particular stage is the same. Operation Enduring Freedom, as tackled by strategic bombers in a stand-off mode, won’t solve all problems. The Taliban will not go. They will become dissolved in their natural medium, that is, where they were born. Given this circumstance, it seems that Hamid Karzai, who has suggested holding talks with the Taliban, is more likely than not right. It is necessary to negotiate. By starting the negotiations with the Taliban, the authorities will involve into a dialogue the entire Afghan street: in Afghanistan, talking is often much more effective than shooting.

But, as is evident from the previous record, the negotiations will only benefit the central authorities under the condition that they have a firm hold on the political and military initiative. Otherwise any invitation to have negotiations will be perceived as a sign of weakness. Not accidentally, the Taliban reacted by asking where Karzai had been in 2001? Clearly, it is necessary to break the current tendency towards deterioration, and, quite opportunely, the Pentagon is considering sending in an additional 37,000 U.S. troops.

The White House, too, is talking about a “new, all-embracing strategy.” It can, of course, be assumed that the “all-embracing” implies some more dedicated economic aid distinct from the current economic policies pursued by the U.S. and other donors. Let me stress that the main thing in the “new” U.S. and NATO strategy in Afghanistan will be different: the U.S. and ISAF servicemen will be issued a recommendation to leave Afghan democracy alone (at last!) and focus on fighting the terrorists and the Taliban.

This recommendation is contained in a JCS report for the White House that was requested by the new administration. It is not accidental that Barak Obama has lately repeatedly urged a review of the strategy in Afghanistan. There is no doubt that the recommendations will be extended to the ISAF as well. After all, the “equal responsibility” plan that the Pentagon made NATO accept in 2005³ is not yet called off. Finally, the report considers one more serious thing. Hamid Karzai is certainly right in saying that the stabilization process in his country has to be “Afghanized.” What does this mean? This means that the Afghan police and the Afghan army must assume the main responsibility for stability and security in that country and that Afghans themselves should play the leading part in their development.

Clearly, Afghanistan’s best fighting force are Afghans themselves, something that became axiomatic as early as during the period of Soviet presence. Judging by all appearances, the Pentagon became conscious of that as well, its report envisaging a broader U.S. involvement in training Afghan security forces.

One more thing: Brussels once mentioned the necessity of establishing regional self-defense forces. This is a good idea the way some well-forgotten past generally is. In a larger scheme of things, Afghanistan, for reason of its social, cultural, economic and even natural geographic peculiarities, is a federation rather than a unitary state structure. Seven general-governorships that existed under the monarchy easily tallied with the said peculiarities. In the current situation, coming back to the idea of general-governorships is, in all evidence, justified. What will it help to achieve? It will enable the “under-disarmed, under-demobilized and under-reintegrated” North Alliance mujahiddin units (the reference is to the well-known DDR program that envisages their disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) to find a hire as precisely this kind of regional self-defense forces.

Thus, the main causes of the current crisis can be summed up as follows. First, the endemic lack of unity within Afghanistan’s political elite, wherefrom there follows a clear deficit of political consolidating power and the general weakness of its pro-democracy political elite.

Second, there is a crisis gripping the Afghan society itself that has failed to decide whether it is ready for democratic change.

Third, there is a deficit of military resources as expressed in what are so far a weak army, a weak police force, and weak security agencies.

As is clear, the stability and security problems are not yet solved to an extent that would make it possible to go over to large-scale implementation of social projects. At the same time, the adjustments announced by both the current Afghan leadership, the U.S. and NATO make everyone hopeful that the situation will start improving.

Drugs are a different matter. In this sense, the situation seems to be deadlocked. And it is a deadlock for Russia as well, because it is vulnerable to the Afghan OMD, opium of mass destruction. Most unpleasantly, it appears Russia has no one to rely on in its fight against the Afghan opium.

State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov says that up till now Russia’s Western partners react one-sidedly to its proposals on fighting drug trafficking in Afghanistan: “They have only taken into consideration what meets their geopolitical and other aims in the region.” This admission was made in the State Duma⁴ in February 2009 in the context of the legislature aimed at tightening the drug-trafficking laws. Participating in

the discussion were all agencies concerned: Federation Council, presidential staff, Government, Security Council, Interior Ministry, FSB, Justice Ministry, Federal Drug Control Service (FDCS), and even Public Chamber.

The discussion centered on Afghan opiates that inundated the world to 93%. With its southern borders unprotected, Russia is actually powerless against them. According to official statistics alone, 10,000 persons die annually from drug-related causes, most of them younger than 39 years of age. Coming to Russia via the friendly or allied (CSTO) Central Asian countries, Afghan opiates are used by 90% of its addicts, whose army increased ten times during the last ten years.⁵

We can only say that it would be surprising if the world community all of a sudden concerned itself with our problem. Eight times fewer addicts die from drugs in the whole of Western Europe than in Russia alone. As is only natural, the Europeans think that Afghan drugs should be a headache for Russia itself.

What international community aid or assistance can Russia hope for in its fight against the Afghan drug traffic? More likely than not, it will have to rely on its own resources. More than that, Gryzlov says Russian parliamentary appeals for fighting the Afghan drug traffic “fail to find an understanding” even “in Central Asian parliaments,” this after certain leaders of Central Asian republics urged well-nigh a strong-arm solution to the Afghan opiate problem. At least, calls were heard to send combat aircraft to bomb opium poppy plantations in Afghanistan. Addressing one of his latest press conferences, the FDCS’s Viktor Ivanov came up with an uncommonly hard-hitting analysis of the Afghan drug traffic in the territory of the Russian Federation. It was a uniquely frank and unflattering report, and the measures he suggested amounted to a war on Afghan drugs.

First, Ivanov said that in terms of damage to Russia’s population there was every reason to put drugs on a par with mass destruction weapons (WMD). But the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is seeking to present the situation in a rosy light in a bid to persuade everyone that areas under narcotic crops are contracting in Afghanistan.

A second important point first made public by the FDCS was that the most advanced and technically equipped laboratories that processed opium into heroin were concentrated close to the borders of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the North Alliance’s zone of influence (and not that of the Taliban as Western experts are wont to say). NATO’s flirtation with the North Alliance can only stimulate drug production. Accordingly, what measures does Ivanov suggest?

First, his agency intends to submit proposals to the Government and President of Russia on how to streamline the granting of Russian citizenship (among others, to citizens of Tajikistan). Currently Tajikistan is the only country, with which Russia has a double nationality agreement, and its territory is the route for more than 60% of “northern” Afghan drugs. It is easy to see how comfortable Tajik drug runners feel with double-nationality passports in their pockets as they cross the Russian border 150 times a year.

Second, it intends to have the UN Security Council discuss why drug production grows in Afghanistan and how to put an end to it. We ought to place a particular focus on this FDCS initiative. The U.S. stance on drugs in Afghanistan is formally immaculate. America has no mandate either for the fight against drugs or any other actions exceeding the framework of Operation Enduring Freedom. Its actions are strictly limited by the struggles against al-Qaeda and the terrorists and the catching of Usama bin Laden and

Mullah Omar. Finally, Donald Rumsfeld once said that drug production growth in Afghanistan was directly linked to the demand existing in Russia and Europe, for which reason it was their own headache. There are no signs that the U.S. position in this matter has changed in any essential way.

Where the NATO-commanded ISAF is concerned, it has, as distinct from the U.S., a specific UN SC mandate, but it does not provide for anti-drug actions either. In 2004, the UNODC ran some pilot operations in Afghanistan to destroy opium poppy crops. Currently such undertakings in Afghanistan seem totally off limits for the UNDOC. At any rate, its chief, Antonio Maria Costa, went on record as saying in Moscow that his Office was unlikely to go back to this sort of operations. It's easy to understand Mr. Costa. Who will fight the drugs in Afghanistan even if the UNDOC approves an appropriate decision? Will the U.S. that leads the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan do so? Of course, not! It will say at once that it carries no weight in Afghanistan, lacking as it does the UN SC mandate.

NATO that coordinates operations by the International Security Assistance Force is approximately in the same position. NATO Secretary General's representative for Central Asia and the Caucasus, Robert Siemens, says unequivocally that NATO will under no circumstances ask the Security Council to authorize the ISAF's participation in destroying poppy crops. It is easy to understand Siemens as well. Even if the ISAF mandate does contain an appropriate line, the final decision on participation in poppy-burning operations is to be approved by parliaments of ISAF member-countries. It is hard to imagine that, for example, the Dutch parliament, its most liberal attitude to drugs notwithstanding, would choose to antagonize the Afghan farmers in its Uruzgan responsibility zone. The Dutch volunteers have enough problems on their hands even without drugs. The same goes for their Helmand-based UK colleagues. Not accidentally, the British special forces hung a poster saying that they didn't fight drugs precisely when the UNDOC was attempting to carry out yet another pilot land operation to destroy poppy crops in Helmand in 2008.

What choices are left to Moscow in the existing situation? A Russia-Afghanistan agreement on fighting illegal drug trafficking is being drafted that envisages operational search undertakings at reciprocal requests. The draft has been approved by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. After the agreement with Kabul is signed, Moscow, as is clear, will not only have the whole of Central Asia join in but will also make the Afghan problem itself more transparent, including where it involves the U.S. and NATO drug-related activities in Afghanistan.

As for Russia's FDCS and its plan to apply to the UN Security Council, the ideal solution in this sense would obviously be the latter approving a separate resolution on Afghan drugs, complete with a separate mandate for a separate international special forces corps with all the rights ensuing from such a mandate. The question is, however, whether any volunteers will be found for the special forces? And won't this initiative end up in the UN Security Council offering Russia to head the corps?

Speaking about Russia's place in the current Afghan policies, one must state with regret that Kabul so far is not counting Russia among its main partners. Kabul's foreign policy concept declares a "strategic partnership with the U.S.A. and the rest of the democratic world," leaving for Russia a modest place among regional states after India and China. Neither does Russia find itself among the Six that were specially commended

by the Afghan President for their participation in the revival of Afghanistan (Saudi Arabia, Japan, U.S.A., India, China, and Iran).

It stands to reason to ask this question: What place does Russia aspire to? What generally is its standing in Afghanistan? It is in a much better shape where the “standing” thing is concerned. Note the following indicative example. Addressing a group of graduates of the Kabul Military Academy, President Hamid Karzai declared that unless the Western nations, which had assumed the commitment to equip the Afghan army, accelerated the supply programs, the arming agenda would be “handled by other countries.” Does it need to be explained that by “other countries” Karzai meant Russia? First, it is hardly accidental that even before his address to the Military Academy graduates the presidential press service made public a letter of the Russian President to Hamid Karzai, where the Russian side expressed readiness to render assistance to the Armed Forces of Afghanistan. Second, it is not accidental either that the Ministry of Defense of Afghanistan announced that a high-ranking Afghan delegation would soon visit the Russian capital for negotiations on an expanded cooperation in the military-technical sphere. But it turned out that neither the Russian Foreign Ministry nor the Russian embassy had received any official notification on this score.

So, what made Hamid Karzai identify the Russian factor and turn to face Russia which was not, until recently, a particularly favored nation in his book? Basically, the intrigue was an easy read. The days marked by the publication of the Russian letter to Hamid Karzai and his oration to the MA graduates were when President Barack Obama of the United States of America held talks with some influential Afghan leaders and potential winners in the forthcoming presidential elections. These were ex-Foreign Minister Abdulla Abdulla, ex-Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali, ex-Finance Minister Ashraf Gani, and the current Governor Gul Aga Sherzai of Nangarhar Province. It merits a separate discussion, whether or not each of the four candidates that arrived in Washington had real chances for making it to the second tour of voting, if not for outright victory. But the main thing lies elsewhere. Observers assert that not only has the new U.S. president, Barack Obama, declared Afghanistan the “central front” of the U.S. war on terror and has a firm intention to double the U.S. contingent on the ground from 30,000 to 60,000 troops, he also has a mind to put Afghanistan’s political elite in order.

The observers believe that the White House plans to deprive Hamid Karzai of its support on the pretext that he is to blame for drug trafficking, corruption, the stealing of donor money, and other things. The new administration is sizing up potential winners in order to know who to help at a decisive moment. Judging by all appearances, Hamid Karzai retaliated by threatening Obama with Russia, or, more precisely, with military-technical cooperation (MTC) with Russia. In principle, Hamid Karzai’s calculation is correct: Who, if not Russia, can be that “other country” capable, should it so wish, of both easily solving the Afghan National Army’s weapons problem and making it an army in its own right into the bargain? It has more than enough experience of working with the Afghan armed forces. An Afghan army that was created with Soviet help was seen as one of the most powerful in the region, and its armaments were more than decent by standards of other regional armies.

Hamid Karzai’s calculation is correct for yet another reason: In Afghanistan, the army by tradition leads the political elite, and befriending the army was always a sure-win gamble. It is this circumstance that Hamid Karzai is emphasizing as he turns to face

Russia. On the one hand, he wants to shake a finger at the U.S. and NATO, while, on the other, he is not averse to finding in the army (via the MTC with Russia) an ally before the upcoming presidential elections. It is another matter whether Russia will be satisfied with the Cinderella role in the Afghan politics.

Today, 20 years on after the Soviet pull-out from Afghanistan (February 15, 1989), we are beginning to rethink Afghanistan's importance for Russia. Igor Reisner, the patriarch of Russian India and Afghanistan studies, described Afghanistan as the key to British India at a time when Pakistan was not yet on the political map of the world. Currently, this key is successfully opening the door to Central Asia. This is that same part of Asia whose wooing figured as the rationale for the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. But today this key is not for Russia that can directly access the Central Asian Region but for some "third," non-regional countries (for example, the U.S. and NATO) that are working with it at the present time. These two, properly speaking, are not concealing their intentions. As for Russia, it should, after 20 years of inaction, give a serious thought to its policy in the Afghan and the entire Central Asian area in the light of Afghanistan emerging in the center of world politics.

NOTES

1 <http://www.un.org/russian/news/fullstorynews.asp?news ID=11175>

2 <http://downloads.unmultimedia.org/radio/en/real/2009/09021700-afghanistan.rm>

3 <http://www.newsazerbaijan.ru/analytics/20070913/41931318.html>

4 <http://www.vz.ro/society/2009/2/19/258008.html>

5 <http://www.fskn.pnz.ru/articles.asp?id=266>