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AFGHANISTAN AND ITS REGION: FROM CHALLENGE TO OPPORTUNITY

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The solution of the current Afghan crisis cannot be achieved without a clear and comprehensive geopolitical vision of the region. The main actors of the international community would make a mistake if they considered Afghanistan as a stand-alone case. On the contrary, history, geography and politics of the entire region are inextricably linked.

For a number of reasons the country has often been perceived as a challenge by neighbouring countries and as a geopolitical opportunity by foreign powers. Due to the current critical internal situation, the spread of illicit traffic and the Taliban revival, Afghanistan is basically considered a threat to regional stability and a potential threat also to other areas geographically connected to Eurasia.

Background

The spread of illicit trafficking from Afghanistan is helped by the grey area of security inside and around the country. This complex situation guarantees the suitable environment for traffickers and criminal groupings, who take advantage from permeable borders, political and economical instability, corruptible officials and overwhelmed state institutions. To worsen the situation there is also the spreading of Taliban influence along the Afghan-Pakistani border which is reason of concern for the whole international community.

The geographical proximity to Central Asia makes this area a major route of illicit transit from Afghanistan and a potential vehicle for the spreading of extremist ideologies. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent difficulties in border control, the campaign against drugs in Iran and the civil war in Tajikistan, around 20 per cent of Afghan heroine is smuggled through Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Other factors that help the trafficking are the long frontier that Central Asian countries share with Afghanistan and the fact that these countries are becoming consumers instead of being only a crossroad to Russia and Europe. Moreover, from a geographic point of view, this area is located between a producing country, Afghanistan, and the main market of destination (Europe)¹. Central Asia (in its extended definition) is one of the regions where security has most been jeopardised by organized crime linked with narcotics traffic.

¹ The porous borders between Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan allow any kind of illicit traffic to go through and even to reach Europe along the so called Northern route. Well developed transportation corridors go from Afghanistan to Tajikistan through the border settlements of Shuroabad, Moskovskiy, Panj and Shaartuz; limited amounts of stuff are smuggled through the Gorny-Badakshan Autonomous Viloyati. Then, from Khujand narcotics get into Uzbekistan and across Batken district enter in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, since 1998 evidence show that Dushanbe airport is very actively used for drug transit, especially towards China. Narcotics from Tajikistan go mainly into Kyrgyzstan from four directions: across the Khorugh-Osh border; through the area of Pamir and Zalayaski mountains; across Jirkatal mountain; via the

Of course, the closest neighbours are the first victims of Afghan instability and the weakest ones. In the case of Tajikistan, the lack of security has made the state a prey to crime and religious extremism and has led to five years of exhausting internal conflict. Along its southern border, together with forms of small trade, illicit traffic (principally drug trade) has begun to flourish². Generally speaking, we can say that the spreading of illicit traffics out of Afghanistan together with the worsening situation along the Afghan-Pakistani border are both sources of deep concern for the Central Asian states that still need the support of foreign countries.

Border control is widely perceived as a key factor. Due to the lack of a stable situation in Afghanistan and an ineffective control of the territory, the only way to stem the spread of any threat to regional security could be an effective policy of border control. Current international programmes such as the EU led BOMCA or the NATO led Counter-Narcotics Training of Central Asian and Afghan Law Enforcement Personnel - NRC project are just drops in the sea.

The issue of border security is particularly sensitive for Tajikistan, which is directly involved in Afghan matters also for ethnical reasons. Aside from the main

Khujan main roads to Batken region and the Ferghana valley in Uzbekistan. The main gate from Afghanistan and Uzbekistan is Termez, while from Tajikistan the main traffic route are in Surkhondaryo region, the Namangan and Tashkent neighbouring area; the area around the Jizzakh district. The route from Kyrgyzstan goes through Andijan and the Namangan district in Uzbekistan and through Batken and Osh regions in Kyrgyzstan. Narcotics come in Turkmenistan mainly from Afghanistan and much less from the Uzbek Khorezm area. Moreover, illicit traffics from Turkmenistan go to Azerbaijan and to Astrakan from the port of Turkmenbashi and also the Ashgabat airport became one of the most important transit points. From Kyrgyzstan narcotics go straight into Kazakhstan, where the main routes are in the Western, Southern and central part of the country. From there they go straight to Europe.

According to the Russian office of UNODC almost the 20% of the heroin produced in Afghanistan uses the Northern route and at least part of it reaches the European markets, while an increasing amount is consumed in Central Asian countries and Russian Federation. Although the higher quantity of opiates which arrives in Europe is smuggled through the Balkan route, nonetheless due to the huge amount of heroin coming from Afghanistan, the Northern route “takes advantage” from the boom of production. Moreover, unlike the Balkan route, where the Turkish criminal groups dominate all the supply chain from origin to European markets, the Northern route is not organized in the same capillary way and opiates are sold and re-sold from different national criminal groups to others, while public officers corruption dominate without any real opposition.

Rustam Burnashev, *Terrorist Routes in Central Asia: Trafficking Drugs, Humans, and Weapons*, in “Connections – The Quarterly Journal”, volume VI, number 1, Spring 2007

² Erica Marat, *Impact of Drug Trade and Organized Crime on State Functioning in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*, China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly, Vol 4, No 1, 2006, www.silkroadstudies.org

international assistance programmes, the US Embassy in Dushanbe has been cooperating, since 1992, with Tajikistan law enforcement structures through assistance projects to provide border security, support rule of law and combat drug trafficking.

The huge effort provided³ gives the sense of how urgent the border security matter is perceived, but, on the other hand, it's clear that an external support is at the base of any effort, due to the lack of sufficient internal financial resources and experience for Central Asian countries to act alone. Because of that, there are no large scale bilateral projects supporting Afghanistan but just an attempt to a multilateral approach supported by the main regional organizations.

A multilateral approach

In the last years, Afghanistan has been perceived by neighbouring countries as a potential threat to their stability due to the spread of illicit trafficking and extremist ideologies out of the country while their weakness in the post soviet transition did not allow any attempt of bilateral cooperation.

Besides from that, Central Asian countries tried to implement a comprehensive approach to common challenges to regional stability through existing structures led by regional powers. On November 4th 2005, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members signed in Beijing a Protocol on the establishment of SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group between SCO and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "with the purpose of elaborating proposals and recommendations on realisation of cooperation between the SCO and Afghanistan on issues of mutual interest"⁴. This tool had a deep symbolic meaning but did not bring practical results. Its establishment gave the impression that regional powers (namely Russia and China) felt the need to reaffirm their presence in Central Asia after almost four years of western involvement in Afghan matters. On the

³ Moreover, on March 27 2009 the US Embassy International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Office (INL) provided two KAMAZ trucks and equipment for the Tajik Border Guards, while in 2008 INL provided 424,000 US dollars for reconstruction of the Sari Gor border post and in 2007 it supported the reconstruction of border posts in Bog (338,000 US dollars) and Bakhorak (298,000 US dollars), in addition to the bridge over the Nijniy Pyandj river (37 million US dollars). All these projects have been implemented along the Tajik-Afghan border. <http://dushanbe.esembassy.gov>

⁴ http://english.scosummit2006.org/en_bjzl/2006-04/21/content_150.htm

other hand, Afghanistan's neighbours were trying to find their own role in the attempt to manage the common goal of ensuring regional security together with Afghan leadership.

The current security worsening inside Afghanistan and the ongoing spread of illicit trafficking forced the Russian presidency of the Organization to re-launch a regional effort through a special conference on Afghanistan under the SCO auspices, held in Moscow on March 27th 2009, just few days before a similar NATO led initiative in The Hague. At the end of the conference, SCO members signed a Declaration, a Statement on combating terrorism, illicit drug trafficking and organized crime and a Plan of Action.

In the Declaration, SCO members stress that the conference results are in line with the efforts of the international community (UN, NATO, OSCE, CSTO, OIC, CICA) to counter the threats of terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crimes and recognize the need to strengthen Afghan leadership through the aegis of United Nations. The ISAF contribution also got a positive evaluation, especially for the need of a closer coordination and cooperation with Afghan authorities in fighting illegal production and drug trafficking.

The Declaration underlined the importance of coordination and cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours.

Moreover, SCO members welcome the initiative of G8 "to facilitate development projects aimed at social and economic development in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the context of cooperation with all neighbouring States. They also welcome the enhancement of counter-narcotics' regional dimension by reaching out, in the next G8 meeting (26th and 27th of June 2009 in Trieste), to the interested Countries and relevant Organizations; and in the same vein, commended the Ankara Trilateral Summit Process".

In the Statement, SCO members address their attention to combating illicit drug trafficking, international terrorism and trans-national organized crime. This will be done through the creation of "anti-drug and financial security belts" and "anti-terrorist security belt" and the enhancement of the cooperation with all relevant states and international

and regional organizations. The Plan of Action establishes deeper cooperation in the above mentioned fields through exchange of information at law enforcement and intelligence level, the strengthening of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group and a possible interaction with the CSTO Foreign Ministers Council Working Group on Afghanistan.

These statements have a political relevance, since they demonstrate the will of Russia's SCO presidency to reaffirm its role on Eurasia through the tool of a successful regional organization however, but this approach is only a piece of the solution.

Final remarks and suggestions

The worsening of the Afghan crisis and the long presence of foreign troops in the heart of Eurasia stimulated regional powers to support new efforts for a possible regional solution.

According to some analysts, 2008 was for SCO "the year of Afghanistan", the top priority issue. In fact, the August tensions between Russia and Georgia changed the agenda, but the local sensitiveness was ready to support any initiative for a regional approach to stabilize Afghanistan⁵. Presently the Obama Administration thinks that a regional approach is of basic importance for the solution of the Afghan situation and that it is directly linked to what is going on in Pakistan: Afghanistan and Pakistan are finally considered two faces of the same problem of regional security.

Even if the SCO initiative for Afghanistan is the sign of this awareness, it does not represent a complete solution of the problem. Although the proposal of a regional approach is a significant step, rather than facing the situation in a comprehensive approach the SCO effort is oriented towards stemming the threats to regional security coming from Afghanistan instead of eradicating them. In the above mentioned official documents, often SCO members talk about "belts" around Afghanistan, but they do not properly stress problems such as the ongoing guerrilla, the lack of control by central

⁵ On June 10-12 2008 it was held in Issyk-Kul' (Kyrghizstan) the regional conference "Afghanistan, SCO, security and geopolitics in Central Asia", organized by the Afghan foundation "Ahmad Shah Massud", the Kyrghyz foundation led by professor Alexander Knyazev and the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

government and the need to sustain an autonomous and effective role on the whole country.

Another limit is that the SCO conference was held just two days before the NATO initiative on Afghanistan at The Hague: two events in the same period of time, two initiatives (after many others held over the years!) and no coordination between them. The risk is a real waste of resources, while a joint effort among all the actors could be a winning approach.

Considering the positive meaning of the current development within SCO, there are some very interesting elements at the basis of a possible attempt to a shared solution.

First of all, the proposal of a regional approach towards Afghanistan comes from an Organization led by the main regional powers, Russia and China, which are two permanent UN Security Council members with a deep political and economical influence in the region. They work in Eurasia through SCO, a successful Organization which comprises four Central Asian countries as members, and key regional players such as Iran, India and Pakistan as observers. The same framework could represent a privileged forum where the main actors that provide regional stability feel comfortable and have always had a fruitful dialogue. They are all interested in a peaceful and secure Afghanistan, in order to achieve the regional stability that they need for trade, energy cooperation⁶ and the return to the best conditions of a modern Silk Road.

The role of China is also to be considered. Although up to now it has only proposed (at bilateral level) economic cooperation, its contribution in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan cannot be ignored⁷.

The SCO conference Statements, however, lack in some crucial points, such as the internal security of Afghanistan and the control of territory, two issues where ISAF

⁶ If the current Afghan crisis comes to an end, the TAPI project of a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Indian and Pakistani markets, crossing Afghanistan, could be finally implemented.

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/news/articles/eav032609c.shtml>

⁷ Inter alia: Niklas Norling, *The emerging China-Afghanistan Relationship*, Central Asia Caucasus Analyst, www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4858

(the UN approved mission directed by NATO) is active since 2003. On the other hand, SCO members do not call upon themselves any military role and are not interested at a possible future involvement. This means that the military role can be maintained by ISAF itself, generating a sort of division of labour. In fact, if SCO wants to become a political mediator between Kabul and the regional key actors in order to satisfy needs of dialogue and effective cooperation in common interests and achievements, ISAF could help Afghan authorities in the training of local personnel, in order for them to gradually provide for their national security.

If a real cooperation between SCO and NATO will become effective instead of only writing it in official statements, the joint and coordinate effort of the main organizations active in and around Afghanistan could achieve important results oriented to the establishment of a stable and peaceful state and NATO could find an exit strategy⁸ from the current involvement in Eurasia.

As final result, Afghanistan could become an opportunity of broader cooperation, instead of being a steady challenge for regional security.

⁸ For an example of best case exit strategy from Afghanistan, see Giovanni Marizza: “No surge is needed to exit from Afghanistan”, 14 March, 2009 in www.loccidentale.it (Italian only). In this article (<http://www.loccidentale.it/articolo/exit+strategy%3A+un+%E2%80%9Csurge%E2%80%9D+al+contrario+per+vincere+in+afghanistan.0067490>) the author, a Major General currently chairman of a NATO working group, proposes the following strategy based on the principle “NATO is there to leave, SCO is there to remain”. UNSC should launch a sort of “relay race” between NATO and SCO. Initially, while SCO secures the Afghan border and defeats the drug trafficking, USA and NATO should enhance the governance and development activities, combat corruption, negotiate with moderate factions, unilaterally reduce the military presence, train and equip the local army and police, enhance the intelligence activities (with related “*covert operations*”) and help the stabilization of neighbouring countries like Pakistan. End state: only SCO (since Afghanistan and all neighbouring countries are either SCO full members or observers) will manage that regional crisis.