

# *Afghanistan*

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The *Afghanistan Regional Forum* series discusses the place of Afghanistan in the wider region and both the local and international preparations for the post-2014 situation. It gives the floor to experts from all over the world, especially from Afghanistan's neighboring countries, Central Asia, China, Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

## **Uzbekistan and the Afghan Reconciliation Process**

**Guli I. Yuldasheva\***

With the forthcoming withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, any solution towards Afghan reconciliation has to take into consideration the search for a new, more balanced security policy for all of Central Asia. Analyzing the Afghan situation both from an internal perspective and from a regional one is strategically important for Uzbekistan due to the important role that Afghanistan plays in the region's stability.

### **Uzbekistan's view on the Afghan crisis**

The Afghan crisis today is entangled with many of the issues surrounding regional security in Central Asia as a whole. This regional security is of vital necessity for landlocked Uzbekistan in order for the country to access world markets, and begin to solve its energy and security issues. Without a stabilized Afghanistan, security in the whole of Central Asia is not possible due to the spillover effects of religious extremism, drugs and weapons

trafficking. The long lasting instability in Afghanistan has already incited unrest in neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Afghanistan continues to help feed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which calls for a "liberation" of the Ferghana Valley from an allegedly illegitimate rule as well as a transformation of Central Asia, or at least Uzbekistan, into an Islamic Caliphate.<sup>1</sup>

This is why Afghan domestic security remains a high priority for Tashkent. The Uzbek government does not believe that the current Afghan government and security forces will be able to maintain stability, let alone survive, without a significant presence of foreign troops. Nor does Uzbekistan expect that any of its Central Asian neighbors will prevent any post-2014 spreading of insurgency. Uzbekistan furthermore does not believe in the effectiveness of regional security establishments such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Coop-

eration Organization (SCO). With the tense ethno-national situation in Southern Kyrgyzstan in mind, Islam Karimov stressed at the CSTO Council meeting in December 2010, that the organization cannot find a “resolution to interstate conflicts and crisis situations without a thorough investigation into their true causes, and without thinking through all the possible consequences from the organization's involvement or interference in these situations.”<sup>2</sup>

With its focus on Afghanistan it is no surprise that Uzbekistan was among the first countries to state that creating stability in Afghanistan was a prerequisite for steady development in Central Asia. Based on the 6+2 (the six countries bordering Afghanistan plus Russia and the United States) group that existed between 1997 and 1999, President Islam Karimov proposed a 6+3 initiative, with the addition of NATO to the group, at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008. However, the Bush administration was unresponsive to the proposition. Due to the ongoing reconciliation process in Afghanistan and the growth of instability in Central Asia and the Middle East, Uzbek leaders have begun to regularly reiterate the 6+3 group idea as the most appropriate measure to help to resolve the Afghan situation.<sup>3</sup>

The 6+3 concept stresses recognizing all parties in Afghanistan, while taking into consideration each party's interests. This can put an end to the instability in Afghanistan by looking for a balanced settlement of key problems, and providing security guarantees for all actors. Professor Frederick Starr, chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program at Johns Hopkins University has positively assessed the 6+3 initiative, considering it the most sober and realistic step towards pushing Afghanistan out of war and poverty, and achieving long-lasting and stable peace.<sup>4</sup> In Uzbekistan's view the basic provisions of any peace negotiation must primarily stress economic assistance and the implementation of socially-oriented infrastructure and humanitarian projects, while considering local customs and Islamic

values. Political negotiations should become an imperative in the international community's involvement in Afghanistan, as achieving peace through military means is impossible.

Region wide approaches to the Afghan issue have stimulated discussion of restoring the “Silk Road,”<sup>5</sup> a strategy that the United States has adhered to since the mid-1990s. The Obama administration in particular has actively demonstrated support for this idea, especially through US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visits to the Central Asia states and Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> The New Silk Road concept could create conditions for the diversification of transportation and hydrocarbon exports, transforming the region into a continental transportation hub, which in turn could improve the local socio-economic situations. It is in the national interest of all the region's states to coordinate their strategies and not to remain outsiders in a potential mutually beneficial structure around Afghanistan. It is not surprising, therefore, that Kabul also presented its “Concept of cooperation with due regard of mutual interests”.<sup>7</sup> However, any implementation of this strategy inevitably comes across numerous unsettled regional problems, both old and new.

Uzbekistan has placed special emphasis on assisting Afghanistan's economic development.<sup>8</sup> By granting access to its airspace and basing rights to international coalition forces for delivering humanitarian cargo; constructing transmission lines for electricity export to Afghanistan; building the Hayraton-Mazar e-Sharif railroad; reconstructing the Mazar e-Sharif-Kabul highway; building new schools, hospitals and other infrastructure; and through direct bilateral trade, Uzbekistan is providing new opportunities for Afghan development.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, since January 2009 Uzbekistan has been a transit country in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which plays a vital role in the transportation of non-military supplies to Afghanistan and the International Security Assistance Forces. Tashkent has reiterated its interest to collaborate further on this issue with the US, NATO, and

other regional partners. However, this project and the 6+3 initiative by their nature are truly international undertakings and their success depends not only on Uzbekistan, but also on US-Russian relations in the region, and the other neighbors as well.

### **Uzbekistan's views on regional cooperation towards Afghanistan**

#### *Iran*

Success in the Afghan reconciliation process cannot be achieved without the active involvement of Iran. Uzbekistan supports diplomatic and economic relations with Tehran, and believes that Iran has many positive assets. The country's demographic potential, its strategic location in the global energy market, its established role with the important Shia minority in Afghanistan, and its past cooperation with the Karzai administration can help in the reconciliation process. It is therefore obvious to Tashkent that Iran should participate in the 6+3 contact group as it can play a significant role. Iran is already *de facto* involved in Afghan processes. In spite of numerous disagreements with Pakistan, Tehran continues to cooperate with Islamabad on Afghan issues. Both Pakistan and Iran are interested in extending economic cooperation to Central Asian states and in developing regional trade.

Some Iranian officials are supposedly involved in the trafficking of drugs and cooperating with the Taliban. For instance, the US Treasury designated General Gholamreza Baghbani, who runs the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force office in Zahedan near the Afghan border, as a narcotics 'kingpin,' and accused him of aiding Afghan drug runners in moving opiates into and through Iran, as well as helping to send weapons to the Taliban.<sup>10</sup>

Simultaneously the tense international situation surrounding Iran in regards to its nuclear program limits Central Asian companies' access to Iranian ports. This includes the ports of Bandar-Abbas and Chabahar, which are

pivotal for reaching the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, and would be key in developing the Silk Road strategy. In spite of the rigidity of Iran's stance on the nuclear issue, the Uzbek government believes that it is still possible to improve the situation, as Tehran has recently indicated its readiness for negotiations on the nuclear issue and is encouraged by the Obama administration's efforts to refrain from military action.<sup>11</sup> Moreover it appears that there is growing discontent among the Iranian people with Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy, as well as the sharpening of an inner political struggle, which could force Iran to make concessions to the international community. Strengthening Afghanistan's trade and transit infrastructure is a topic of common interest between Washington and Tehran. This is a mutually advantageous area where both countries can come together to begin a dialogue.

#### *Russia*

Russia is another important regional actor whose interests in Central Asia and potential to contribute to the Afghan process cannot be ignored. NATO leaders recently invited Moscow to participate in the activities surrounding Afghanistan. Russia's involvement could be further strengthened by the possibility of economic dividends. The volume of oil and gas deposits in Afghanistan is valued at 40 million tons of oil and 137 billion cubic meters of natural gas, which will certainly attract the attention of Russian energy firms.<sup>12</sup>

However, the bilateral relations between the United States and Russia have not always been smooth. American-Russian cooperation in Afghanistan is strictly concentrated on anti-narcotic operations, though this has been complicated by Afghan President Hamid Karzai's skepticism of Russian involvement.<sup>13</sup> In October 2010, the heads of the Russian and American counter-narcotics agencies signed an agreement on counteracting illegal drug trafficking, deciding to cooperate on this issue.<sup>14</sup> Then in 2011, two joint anti-narcotic operations, "Octopus" and "Asian Man," were

conducted in Afghanistan. As the newly elected President of Russia Vladimir Putin pointed out, the scope of Afghan drug trafficking demands an increase in multilateral cooperation on this issue, using international bodies like the United Nations and such regional organizations as CSTO, SCO and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

In February of this year, Putin stated his intention of participating in humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan: "We are ready to examine a serious enhancement of Russian participation in providing assistance to the Afghan people."<sup>15</sup> Moscow is planning to restore approximately 150 Soviet-time projects in the country, including investment into hydroelectricity, railway systems, the construction sectors, as well as oil extraction.<sup>16</sup> On March 2, 2012, during the first session of the Russian-Afghan intergovernmental commission in trade and economic cooperation, a protocol on economic cooperation was signed naming energy as one of the key spheres of bilateral relations. Russia has already declared its readiness to participate in the TAPI gas pipeline and the CASA-1000 hydroelectricity project.<sup>17</sup> Viktor Ivanov, the head of the Russian Federal anti-drugs Agency, stated that developing transit gas pipelines in Afghan territory could be an efficient deterrent against drug production.<sup>18</sup>

It seems, as some Western analysts rightfully considered,<sup>19</sup> that the current strengthening of Russian and Chinese military presence throughout Central and South Asia does not contradict US strategic interests and can be seen as complementary towards Washington's interests in regional peace, stability, and the prevention of future terrorist safe havens. This evolution conforms to the New Silk Road strategy, foreseeing balanced regional cooperation in all of Central Asia.

### *Pakistan*

One of the most troublesome points in the regional partnership on Afghanistan is the current tension between the United States

and Pakistan. Pakistan's significance due to its geographic proximity to Afghanistan and other Central Asian states should not be underestimated. More than 70 percent of the logistical support for the international coalition troops was provided through Pakistani territory until it was closed to the ISAF in November 2011.<sup>20</sup>

The continuation of American-Pakistani tensions, with their indirect link with Iran,<sup>21</sup> as well as radical organizations based in Pakistan challenges the stability of Central Asia, and threatens the Silk Road strategy. Another contentious issue is Islamabad's attitude towards the Qatar Process. Pakistan is leery of the process and prefers to sit on the sidelines,<sup>22</sup> even though its full support of the peace negotiations would be more valuable than the presence of the Karzai administration.<sup>23</sup> Fortunately, Pakistani-American relations have recently improved and there is hope that the two sides will restore their partnership.

Continued violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan though is preventing the full development of the southern corridor. This corridor could provide Central Asian states access to Karachi and Gwadar. Tashkent has always valued a Pakistani transit route. Uzbekistan alone currently has 68 joint enterprises with Uzbek and Pakistani investors. Without any transit strategies though, the Uzbek-Pakistani trade will remain limited. In 2010, it equaled only modest US\$40 million.<sup>24</sup>

### *Absence of unity among Central Asian states*

Uzbekistan believes that due to transportation and communication networks, the energy and mineral resources, and the landlocked location of the Central Asian region, there are no viable alternatives other than regional integration between the neighboring states, including Afghanistan.

However, the events of the last decade, especially the last few years, in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have placed Tashkent in an un-

easy position. The spread of radical Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan as well as the June 2010 events in Osh has also made Tashkent uneasy about border issues. Around 1,300 people and organizations have been classified as extremist by the Kyrgyz law enforcement agencies.<sup>25</sup> While due to the events in Osh, Uzbekistan has accepted more than 100,000 refugees from Kyrgyzstan. It is obvious that the continuation of interstate tension and conflicts in and around Central Asia hampers fruitful regional cooperation and provides fertile ground for radical organizations to flourish.

Uzbekistan does not want to close its borders, but the negative historical legacy of this issue decelerates the integration process and has to be taken into account. In some cases, the Uzbek government believes it has to block its borders due to national security concerns. According to data from Uzbek diplomats, 25 percent of the Afghan heroine is transported through Central Asian countries for both foreign and domestic consumption. In these conditions a European Schengen-style border regime is impossible.

There are signs of mutual interest in multilateral projects though. These can gradually lay the groundwork for improving interstate relations. Kyrgyzstan's new leadership is interested in a 268-kilometer railroad line that would link China with Kyrgyzstan's southern provinces and Uzbekistan. Although this project does not directly deal with Afghanistan, it can help stimulate the normalization of Uzbek-Kyrgyz bilateral relations. The other integration effort is connected with the Central Asian Counter-narcotics Initiative (CACI), initiated by the US State Department to fight against drug trafficking in Central Asia. The State Department has already assigned US\$4.2 million to support local law enforcement agencies and foresees additional measures to consolidate anti-drug cooperation within the Central Asian states.<sup>26</sup> Of course misunderstandings may occur in the process, but it demonstrates a common will-

ingness to overcome present difficulties between neighboring countries.

### Conclusions

The main regional problems surrounding Afghanistan have their roots in both old and new conflicts and misunderstandings. Some improvements have nevertheless happened: American-Uzbek summits on regional issues, President Obama's trip to Kabul on May 1, 2012 to sign a landmark strategic partnership agreement between the United States and Afghanistan,<sup>27</sup> Iranian-Afghan agreement on the transit goods through Chabahar. However, the problems remain numerous: a lack of Central Asian geopolitical unity; the absence of a single, commonly accepted strategy for Afghanistan in the region; and the continuation of interstate tensions. Any solution for Afghanistan reconciliation will have to include all regional players, as the interconnection on the ground is growing. For Uzbekistan, it is clear that the Afghan reconciliation process cannot occur while the US is engaging in a confrontation with Iran, increasing tensions with Pakistan, and having disagreements with Russia.

The complex environment surrounding Afghan issues means that all parties must cooperate to succeed. International cooperation on the economic, humanitarian, and educational issues must complement the security measures in Afghanistan. In this sense NATO forces should not leave their work in Afghanistan unfinished. Regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the Collective Security Treaty Organization can also provide additional assistance. As a first step towards realizing the 6+3 initiative Uzbek officials suggest joint meetings with representatives of all the region's states at the level of deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs, NATO representatives, and the main Afghan parties, including the so-called moderate part of Taliban. This initiative remains the best solution for Afghanistan and needs to be re-considered by the international community.

The opinions expressed here are those of the author only and do not represent the Central Asia Program.

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<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey F. Gresh, "Russia, China, and Stabilizing South Asia," *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2012, [http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/12/russia\\_china\\_and\\_stabilizing\\_south\\_asia](http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/12/russia_china_and_stabilizing_south_asia).

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