

Central Asia Security Problems in the Context of Coalition Troops Withdrawal from Afghanistan

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Abstract

The importance of the problem under study is suggested by the geopolitical significance of Central Asia, increased threat to its security on behalf of radical Islamism, as well as ended coalition troops withdrawal from Afghanistan by the beginning of 2015. The article is intended to analyze the link between the withdrawals of International Security Assistance Force from Afghanistan and the modern security challenges of Central Asia, also to determine counteraction to these threats. The main approach to the study of the problem is geopolitical analysis of the region and threats to its security. During the study there were pointed out such factors as the penetration of Islamic extremists into the region from Afghanistan, maintenance of US military bases, as well as the feasibility of emergence of destructive political developments, like “Arab spring”. The particular emphasis is given to the role of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Collective Security Treaty Organization in providing regional security and preventing destructive scenario. The materials of the article might be useful in conducting scientific research on the issues of Central Asia, providing lectures and seminars in training, also working out mechanisms of counteraction to the treats of regional security.

Keywords: security, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Taliban, Islamic movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic State, International Security Assistance Forces, radical Islamism, “Arab spring”, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Collective Security Treaty Organization

1. Introduction

Security problems in Central Asia at the beginning of the XXI century became more relevant after the launch of the “Operation Enduring Freedom” and deployment of coalition troops of International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. Despite the claims of American researchers after several years of coalition troops deployment that “the power is seized from the hands of Taliban, “Al-Qaida” camps are liquidated to some extend, and the national political consensus is seem to be formed” (Olcott, 2005), the situation was not so optimistic. “Taliban” did not only manage to keep its armed groups and the leaders headed by Mohammed Omar, but also consistently increased its activity. It might be reported as though the presence of foreign contingent was like a catalyser for an expansion of this movement and its radicalization.

At the same time during the years of coalition troops’ presence, the production of heroin in the territory of Afghanistan has grown up to 40 times. According to the statistics of UN Office On Drugs And Crime, in 2010 Afghanistan’s share was 89 % of the world illegal opium production (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010), which appeared to be the serious threat to the security of not only Central Asia, but also neighboring regions.

In June 2011 US President Barack Obama issued an order to withdraw main contingent of American troops from Afghanistan before 2015. Soon, in May 2012 in the NATO Summit in Chicago the decision about the halt of operation of International Security Assistance Force by December 2014 was made (The Chicago Summit, 2012).

Troops withdrawal in the period of increasing activity of Islamists and achievements of maximum amount of drug production caused concerns of not only regional subjects, but also countries providing stability in Central Asia, primarily Russian Federation and People’s Republic of China. Many researchers agree that after 2014 the threat to the security in the region would have a significant increase.

So, according to Russian authors “more serious external challenge for Central Asia in the nearest future remains

Afghan factor with such possible perspectives as reclaim of power by Taliban in Afghanistan and its becoming the centre of radical Islamism” (Malysheva, 2013). Chinese researchers considered that the main challenges to the security in the region would become religious extremism, cross-border criminality and penetration of external terrorist groups from Afghanistan and Pakistan (Tzyan’zhun, 2013). Also we consider that the above mentioned factors might provoke destructive processes on the scenario of “Arab spring” in many countries of the region.

To the moment of decision making about withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force, there were 132 457 military personnel, of which 90 000 were Americans. The main contingent withdrawal was completed by the fall of 2014, when there remained a bit more than 41 000 coalitionists in Afghanistan (International Security Assistance Force, 2014). Since that many expected threats started to be seen quite clearly.

2. Methodological Framework

The methodological basis of the research is mainly geopolitical analysis. It allows to understand what is the significance of Central Asia and who is interested in providing its security. Also it allows to determine the role of Afghanistan in the possible destabilization of the region.

Central Asia at the beginning of the XXI century attracts more attention of the main geopolitical players. Firstly, there are enormous reserves of natural resources, primarily energy resources such as oil, gas, coal, uranium, as well as hydro energy resources. Secondly, the region has an important transitional significance, because there are various communications on and off its territory, including the most important oil and gas pipe line. Apart from that this region is a joint in a way, situated at the junction of three civilization plates – Russian, Chinese and Islamic world.

That’s why more efforts in providing security of this region are being done by Russia and China. For Russia Central Asia is not only significant fragment of post Soviet territory, connected to it by economical, political, cultural and humanitarian relations. Today it is also the most important region from the point of view of Russia in providing its own security. From here take start traditional threats and challenges, connected with the geopolitical and military factors as well as new ones such as extremism, drug trafficking, illegal migration and ecological problems.

For China Central Asia is also important from the point of view of providing security. The region, neighbouring with Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, was and is traditional base for Uigur separatists. Controlling Central Asia, eliminating extremism and separatism on the other side of the border, People’s Republic of China provides security of its North-Western regions and territorial integrity of the country.

Besides, today Russia as well as China is in a difficult situation. Russia suffers from colossal pressure, threats and sanctions because of the situation in Ukraine. At the same time US conducts reorientation of its military force from the Greater Middle East to Asia-Pacific region to the border of China. This is witnessed through the National military strategy of US accepted in February 2011 (The National Military Strategy, 2011), and joint exercises of US with the military forces of Japan, Philippines and South Korea which became more frequent during the last three years.

Under these conditions both countries have increasing necessity to provide security in Central Asia, which is considered by Russia as “soft south underbelly”, and by China as “deep western backyard”. At the same time in case of destabilization of the region it might become the “second front” for Russia as well as for China, which they cannot at any rate tolerate. So, these two countries have the same interests in providing security in Central Asia, and these interests are firstly the struggle against terrorism, separatism and extremism, secondly prevention of the military presence of external players in the region, primarily of US and NATO.

Afghanistan has not large natural resources. Nevertheless, during the last three centuries great powers conducted active policy and military operations there: in the XIX century Great Britain on numerous occasions, in the XX century Soviet Union, and in the XXI century US with its NATO allies. It might be explained by its geopolitical location of Afghanistan between Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia and China. From this territory many important political subjects and regions can be controlled.

The situation in Afghanistan especially has a great influence on Central Asia. At first, three out of five countries of Central Asia such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have the direct borders with Afghanistan. Secondly, among 4 largest ethnic groups two like Tajiks and Uzbeks are the titular ethnic groups of the neighbouring countries. Thirdly, the main routs of drug trafficking from Afghanistan go through Central Asia. And fourthly, Afghanistan is a firm base to spread radical Islamism into Central Asia.

That’s why any changes of the situation in Afghanistan have influence on Central Asia. The research helps to

find out what threats the situation formed in Afghanistan in connection with the International Security Assistance Force troops withdrawal brings into the region.

3. Results

3.1 Activation of Islamists in Afghanistan

Troops' withdrawal from the start caused activation of the "Taliban" movement, which became stronger in 2014 in connection with the presidential elections in Afghanistan. Only in January 2014 there were 16 violent terroristic attacks, which took the lives of 150 people, including Russian diplomat, member of UN mission on assistance to Afghanistan Vadim Nazarov. The activity of the insurgents has increased since that time.

During the presidential election campaign and elections in two rounds in April and in June 2014, their activity led to the disruption of the elections in some south eastern provinces. After the elections "Taliban" turned from separate terror attacks to coordinated and well planned operations on capturing the whole cities and districts. In particular, in August 2014 the insurgents tried to create a firm base in Kunduz province on the border with Tajikistan, seizing Chakhardara district.

All at the same time on the north of Afghanistan, close to borders of CIS, before NATO troops' withdrawal, easily emerged two hotbeds of concentration of the extremist organization insurgents, each with amount of several thousand people. First is located in the area Badakhshan and Kunduz provinces (near the border with Tajikistan), second is in Badgis province (near the border with Turkmenistan).

These firm bases were used to train insurgents to act in Central Asia republics. Among them there were insurgents of Islamic movement of Uzbekistan, numerous and experienced Islamic organization led by Usman Gazi, who were most active then. According to the information of a special envoy of Russian President in Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov, all local warlords of Taliban, especially in Badgis, to the north of the border with Turkmenistan, got an order to cooperate with Islamic movement of Uzbekistan, help them form and strengthen their pivots (Kabulov, 2014).

In October 2014 and Taliban and Islamic movement of Uzbekistan officially joined "Islamic State", former "Islamic State of Iraq and Levant". Since that from time to time in Afghanistan and Pakistan appear insurgents under the black banner of IS. So, in Afghan province Gazni they attacked several villages, burnt about 60 houses and beheaded around 100 members of Afghan police families (Bersenev, 2015). At the beginning of March, 2015 deputy Minister of Defence of Russian Federation Anatoli Antonov stated that groups of terroristic organization IS have already appeared in Afghanistan, they start causing threats to Russia's allies on Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Due to the strengthening of ties between Islamists of Central Asia and IS, the influx of the volunteers from the Republics of the region into the groups of IS fighting in Iraq and Syria increased. Having enriched combat experience and having got ideological training they would get back to their own countries and become destabilizing element. After all that there will be not only an increase of threat of Islamists penetration from Afghanistan into neighbouring Republics, but also the replication of "Arab spring" scenario in these territories, where Islamists are the main striking force.

3.2 The Rising Threat of Destabilization on the "Arab Spring" Scenario in the Republics of Central Asia

"Arab spring" is a collective name, which was given to the political processes in North Africa and Middle East that began in January 2011. There are two points of view on these processes in political and nonfiction literature: either it is spontaneous uprising of people for liberty and democracy (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2012), or planned influence of external forces to destabilize countries and regions aimed at setting their own control (Byalyi et al., 2011).

We consider both viewpoints are correct. On the one hand in every country seized by "Arab spring" there were political, social and economical reasons for dissatisfaction and protests. On the other hand they were used by external forces, without their intervention, internal problems in no other countries would lead to the total destabilization and topple the regimes. Such development of the situation might happen in the countries of Central Asia, which have many similar features with the countries, seized by "Arab spring".

Important geopolitical position of Central Asia and the presence of enormous reserves of fossil fuels might tempt external forces to change existing political configuration in the region, as well as in the countries of North Africa and Middle East.

Internal social and political situation in the post Soviet countries of the region also has some similarities with the situation in the countries which underwent the shocks of "Arab spring". All they are Muslim communities with

the secular governing system of authoritarian character, suppressing radical Islamists and democratic opposition. In this case the society is organized into a rather stable social and political pyramid, consisting of 3 basic levels. For each level the interested forces use different set of tools and methods to destruct the system. These levels should be taken into consideration in conjunction with the methods of exposure.

The first level, the bases of the pyramid is the people, social lower parts. These are workers, peasants, unemployed, that is less assured and mostly rightless citizens, but at the same time most active during uprisings. Their dissatisfaction firstly triggered by real social problems such as unemployment, low living standards, overpopulation, corruption. They are taken into the protests by local radical Islamists, backed by International terrorist or extremist organizations.

Islamists are constantly provided with literature, finances, weapons, explosives, are strengthened by insurgents from other countries and regions. Namely they carry out terror acts and other violent actions, provoking the governments to counteract, that allow to accuse them in the crimes against the people and humanity. Here the role of extremists of Central Asia, who got experience in Afghanistan and Middle East, increase.

The second layer of the pyramid is the middle class or groups of people, which are clearly close to them according to the local specific features. These are representatives of medium and small businesses, as well as intelligentsia and students. As a rule, representatives of this group are for democratic changes, but they are not very decisive for street actions.

As they are active internet users, they can easily be affected through the social network, blogosphere, specially created websites. The information campaign and its content is conducted and created by migrants, and also by local activists, who underwent special trainings abroad. Today there are many websites or groups in social network created by the immigrants from Central Asia countries and opposition oriented to the government.

The upper level of pyramid is military and bureaucratic elite, who belong to ruling party, led by irremovable leader. These are Nur Otan in Kazakhstan, People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, and People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan and to some extend Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan. This level provides stability and security of all political construction and control political machinery, army, security agencies, and big business. They keep significant resources in their hands. Even though having money, power and force, this level has to resist the destruction of state system rather hard. However, part of its representatives might be blackmailed, part might be bribed, and part might be eliminated or hatched. And finally the entire pyramid might crash, and the country might sink into a chaos for a long time.

3.3 The Threats to the Security of the Region on the Part of US Military Troops and Its Allies

The US and its allies played a great role in support of anti-government forces in "Arab spring". Today Americans, having announced the troops' withdrawal, did not leave Afghanistan, as it was done by Soviet forces in 1989, but they still keep 9 military bases with well developed infrastructure and significant number of military personnel. Currently the US troops and their allies from 27 countries of NATO and 14 member-countries count for 13195 people, participating in a new operation "Resolute support mission" (Resolute Support Mission, 2015). However there is nothing to say about fight against "Taliban".

According to the official line, the bases are necessary to train Afghan forces of security, primarily, military officers of Ministry of Defense and General Staff of Afghanistan, which now counts for 500 people. Certainly, they will not simultaneously be trained in American bases, though for that purpose one base would be quite enough.

However it is not the quantity that surprises, but the quality of the remaining bases. In some of them, for instance, on the base in Shurabak, which is 70 km to the south of Kandagar, there are strong hard-based infrastructure and flight landing strip with the length of 3 km. Definitely, such fortresses would become strong leverage on some neighbouring regions and countries such as Central Asia, China, Russia, India and Iran.

Besides, they might be the basis to carry out any military operation. And, finally, the bases might be the tool to control the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to India, which goes through the territory of Afghanistan and Pakistan. "Turkmengas", Indian GAIL and Pakistani Inter State Gas Systems signed the agreement about this.

The definitive number and status of American troops after 2014 were not agreed for a long time, as the former President of Afghanistan Khamid Karzai refused to sign an agreement, bringing forward new terms and criticizing American policy in the region. In the interview to "Washington post" he claimed that the war burst out not just for the interests of his country (Karzai, 2014).

However, new President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai signed an agreement on deployment of

American bases and NATO contingent in the territory of his country right in the next day after inauguration. It is not a mere coincidence that during the challenge for the presidency with his rival Abdullah Abdullah, and then in the rows over the election results of 2014 US supported him.

It is interesting that the new US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, appointed in February 2015, made his first visit namely to Afghanistan and met with President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and the commander of military forces General John Campbell. At the same time he expressed an idea of a possible prolongation of American troops' presence in Afghanistan.

So, the threat to the regional security might be not only "Taliban" and other extremists groups, who have taken the withdrawal of International forces as signal to act, but also American bases that remain in Afghanistan without any clear purposes.

3.4 Tools to Counteract the Threats to the Central Asia, Which Come from Afghanistan

Almost all countries that are interested in counteraction to the mentioned threats are united into Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In the summit of 2012 held in June in Beijing the leaders of the participating countries signed the decision about providing Afghanistan with the observer status in the organization, and Turkey with status of dialogue-partner.

Since that Shanghai Cooperation Organization embraces 14 countries such as 6 permanent members (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), 5 observing (Afghanistan, India, Iran, Mongolia, Pakistan) and 3 dialogue-partners (Belorussia, Turkey, Sri Lanka).

Also during this period such questions as to create mechanisms for its rapid reaction to the emergency situations, form the unified register of terroristic organizations and people suspected in the involvement in terroristic activities, expand the collaboration in the sphere of migration were on the agenda.

The next summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organization held in September 2013 in Bishkek was mainly devoted to the discussion of the security problems of Central Asia due to the situation in Afghanistan. Member countries proposed the establishment of independent, neutral, peaceful, prosperous state, free of terrorism and drug criminality in Afghanistan (Bishkek declaration, 2013). Besides, in the summit the decision about the process onset of the transition of India and Pakistan from observer status to member states of the organization was made.

The 5th joint military exercises under the title of "Peaceful mission" held in China in August 2014 devoted to fight the security threats in the region became some kind of rehearsal of joint actions of member states. More than 7000 military personnel and almost 500 units of military hardware from Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia and Tajikistan took part in the drills. For the final stage of the exercises in China in the training area Czhuzhikhe in Inner Mongolia there was built the whole city which the military personnel had to liberate from the conditional terrorists.

The last summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organization took place in Dushanbe in September 2014. The main topics of its agenda were the events in Ukraine and Afghanistan. Besides, the accession of India and Pakistan as full members was finalized and they reached an agreement about the formation in Central Asia compatible system of communication. Following the results of the summit there were 10 documents signed, including Dushanbe declaration (Dushanbe declaration, 2014) and the solution of the council of the heads of the member states about the project of Development strategy of the Organization up to 2025.

After the summit the chairmanship was given to Russia. It coincided with the end of International Security Assistance Force contingent withdrawal from Afghanistan. Russia proposed an initiative about creation of universal centre of complex fight against terrorism, illegal drug trafficking, gun turnover, organized criminality and information security on the bases of Regional anti-terrorist structure under Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Besides to provide security of the region Russia promotes an idea of more close collaboration between Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Collective Security Treaty Organization unites Russia, Belorussia, Armenia and three countries of Central Asia such as Kazakhstan, Kirgizia and Tajikistan. It holds regular military peacekeeping exercises in Central Asia that are directed to work out coordination of the military forces of the member countries. Alongside with the last two summits of the Organization, one of the main topics was the counteraction to the challenges and threats coming from Afghanistan as well as the help to Tajikistan to strengthen the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

The important task of the Collective Security Treaty Organization today remains the reinforcement of combat effectiveness of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force. They are component part of constant readiness and

embrace high mobility contingent of the military forces of member states, as well as force generation of special handling detachment, which combine the units of security agencies and special service, internal affairs agencies and internal security troops, and emergency reaction agencies. Besides, under the Organization there created four regional groups of forces and facilities of collective security, among which there is Collective Rapid Deployment Forces of the Central Asian region.

It can be considered that joint efforts of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Collective Security Treaty Organization are capable to deter and neutralize the challenges and threats of the regional security.

4. Discussions

The security problems of Central Asia and their link with Afghanistan at the beginning of XXI century were mentioned in different works of various researchers, specializing in this region. Among American authors it is necessary to point out Martha Brill Olcott (Olcott, 2005), whose optimism about the situation in Afghanistan has already been mentioned at the Introduction, and Frederic Starr, who, indicating the link of Afghanistan with the other republics of Central Asia, put forward an idea about creation of regional forum "Greater Central Asia Partnership for Cooperation and Development". It should be a union headed by Afghanistan, which might become a model for regional subjects on the issues of democratization and development under the supervision of USA (Starr, 2005).

Russian researchers such as V.V.Naumkin (Naumkin, 2005), D.B.Malysheva (Malysheva, 2013), I.D.Zvyagelskaya (Zvyagelskaya, 2005) conducted researches on specific aspects of threat to Central Asia coming from Afghanistan, paying special attention to the factor of religious extremism and its support from outside as well as drug trafficking. The war between USA and Taliban and its influence to the international situation was mentioned by the authors of collective work "International relations in Central Asia" edited by A.D.Bogaturov (International relations in Central Asia, 2011). The book "Afghanistan at the beginning of XXI century" edited by the leading Russian specialist on this country V.G.Korgun, which touches some aspects of the impact of the situation on the region in the whole should be specially mentioned (Afghanistan at the beginning of XXI century, 2004).

Among Chinese authors apart from Tzyan'zhun (Tzyan'zhun, 2013), there should be mentioned the work of Zhao Huasheng, director of the Centre of researches on Russia and Central Asia under the Fudan university in Shanghai (Huasheng, 2005). He points out some threats to the security of Central Asia connected with Afghanistan and considers Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a tool to counteract these threats.

Besides, some other aspects of this topic are enlightened in the works of the authors from the region's republics. So, Murat Laumullin from Kazakhstani Strategic Studies Institute points out the problems of terrorism and drug threats coming from Afghanistan (Laumullin, 2009), and Alexander Knyazev from Kirgizia studies the link between the situation in Afghanistan and the coup in his republic (Knyazev, 2007).

However, none of these works analyze the changes of the situation after coalition troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan. And it is obvious, because these works are published before 2013, during the times when the troops' withdrawal and the processes that follow it did not become reality, influencing the situation in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries.

The given article is intended to fulfil this gap, as the great attention in it is paid to the actual political processes in Afghanistan, connected with the end of a mission of International Security Assistance Force, the research of its influence on the security in Central Asia as well as options to prevent negative consequences for the region.

5. Conclusion

So, the aggravation of the internal political situation in Afghanistan, caused by the coalition troops' withdrawal, might have destructive impact on the whole Central Asia. The possibility of Taliban victory in Afghanistan or in some provinces is getting more feasible, which increases the danger of penetration of Islamic insurgents into the republics of Central Asia. This in its turn might be a kick-start of the destructive processes that lead to the crack of state system and chaos in the region on scenario of "Arab spring". Besides, a certain pressure on the situation in the region is being made by the remained American bases and significant military contingent in Afghanistan, which from now on will not fight against Taliban.

However, under agreed efforts of Russia, China and the countries of the region, who are integral parts of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Collective Security Treaty Organization, it might be possible to prevent destabilization and to provide security and stable development.

6. Recommendations

Materials of the given article might interest scientists, specializing in the sphere of International Relations and Regional Studies, who conduct research into political processes in Central Asia. They also might be useful for students and postgraduates training in the corresponding speciality. And the article might help while planning concrete political steps on providing security in Central Asia.

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