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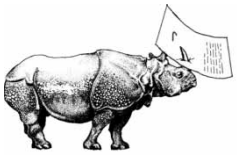

Vadim Kozyulin

AFGHANISTAN-2014 AND THE TALIBAN WITH ITS HEAD HELD PROUD BUT LOW

According to official plans, over the next two years three radical changes are going to happen in Afghanistan: economic transformation, political transformation, and the transfer of security responsibility to the Afghan national forces.

- *Economic transformation.* The number of contracts and the amount of money spent in Afghanistan will inevitably go down. Right now spending is unsustainably high, and not all this money is being spent wisely. The objective is to redistribute the resources and to attract private investment.
- *Political transformation.* The next presidential election is scheduled for 2014. Hamid Karzai, who is serving his second term of office, has promised not to run for the third. The arrival of a new president should bring some order to the country.
- *Transfer of security responsibility to the Afghan national forces*. In the coming years the role of ISAF will be limited to training the Afghan army and police forces. Over the coming decade the Afghan forces will fight the rebels on their own; the American military will not take part in combat operations.

ECONOMICS AND FINANCE

The United States spends about $115 billion a year in Afghanistan. The training of the Afghan army and police costs $1 billion a month; 90 percent of that money is provided by the United States. U.S. officials make no secret of the fact that in the future the size of American aid to Afghanistan should be comparable to the money being received by Israel or Egypt, i.e. $1–1.5 billion a year. The IMF estimates, however, that Afghanistan will require $68 billion just to train its army and police forces. The country's own GDP is $18 billion, so international assistance will be indispensible. In 2011 only 3 percent of the cost of maintaining the Afghan police force was contributed by the Afghan government itself. In 2012 the figure reached 7 percent. The issue of international economic assistance to Afghanistan was discussed in July 2012 at a special conference in Tokyo. However, the Chicago summit held beforehand in May 2012 has made it quite clear that there is not enough money in the kitty.

Afghanistan's civilian institutions account for only 20–30 percent of all government spending. Specialists estimate that only about a fifth of that money reaches the ordinary people; the rest goes to those who are in fact responsible for the chaos in the country: contractors and intermediaries.

The Americans believe that Afghanistan's economic problems can be resolved by making the country part of the regional transit and communication networks. But that will require cooperation from neighboring countries and, insofar as possible, the participation of private investors. Small and medium foreign businesses (including American companies) have already realized the possibilities of cashing in on war, and built some infrastructure on both sides of the Afghan border. Large private companies have long been contemplating big projects such as the TAPI oil

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pipeline—but the time for it has not yet arrived in Afghanistan. The future commercial system, which aims to open up great opportunities for the whole region, could be based on the Northern Distribution Network, which is a military supply system. The U.S. strategy is to hand that network over to countries in the region, the idea being that at some point in the future it will start to pay for itself.

The United States wants to encourage economic cooperation between countries in the region and Afghanistan; it is ready to support bilateral and multilateral partnership projects; even Iran is welcome to participate.

POLITICAL AND MILITARY TRANSFORMATION

Many experts reckon that Hamid Karzai, who used to be the guarantor of the constitution and the central figure in the entire Afghan arrangement, has become synonymous for ordinary Afghans with corruption, misrule and dependence on the United States. The next presidential election is scheduled for 2014. Observers tend to believe that Karzai will try to cling on to his job. The election will be an opportunity for the United States to reformat the Afghan political scene by bringing to power an Afghan Gorbachev, i.e. a politician who has an attractive set of ideas and slogans, and who will be seen by ordinary Afghans as a *third force* capable of uniting the country. Apart from charisma, the future Afghan president must also have two other attributes: he must be an ethnic Pashtun, and he must be a capable military leader, because he will have to fight.

Possible candidates include:

- Ali Ahmad Jalali, the former Afghan interior minister;
- Farooq Wardak, the current education minister;
- Abdullah Abdullah, who served as the Afghan foreign minister until 2006, as interior minister until 2009, and is now the main opposition candidate.

By October 1, 2012 the United States hoped to reduce the number of its soldiers stationed in Afghanistan to 68,000. The forces of Washington's international coalition partners, which reached 40,000 at their peak, were also planned to be drawn down. But there is no real reason to expect a weakening of the central government in Kabul following the troop withdrawal. The gradual transition of the security remit to the Afghan national forces will be backed by the strengthening of the aerial reconnaissance system, similar to the one now being deployed by NATO in Europe, with a control center in Italy. Real-time data supplied by that system will enable the Afghan government to launch lightning-fast strikes against the rebels, just as it now happens in Pakistan. The only difference is that in Afghanistan the manned reconnaissance aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), coupled with formidable firepower, will be used in tandem with agents on the ground recruited from among the locals and the population of neighboring states. Afghanistan has good mobile telephone network coverage (50 percent of the Afghans use mobile phones) and an extensive network of internet cafes. This offers excellent opportunities for transmitting reconnaissance information gathered in the field.

The Taliban will not be able to show themselves openly in Afghanistan; the country will become a huge testing range for new reconnaissance and data analysis instruments, UAVs, and offensive weapons systems. The U.S. Air Force will have full air supremacy in the country; it will be assisted by Afghanistan's own air force, which is equipped with armed Mi-17 transports and Mi-35 attack helicopters. The Taliban, meanwhile, will not be able to field any armored vehicles or artillery; neither will they be allowed to create regular military formations to conduct large-scale combat operations.

WHERE DOES THE TALIBAN FIT IN THIS PICTURE?

For now it is not clear what role the Taliban will play in the Afghan political setup after 2014. The concessions demanded of them are almost entirely unrealistic; they include agreeing to abide by the country's constitution; renouncing violence; and recognizing the rights of women and ethnic minorities. The Taliban themselves, meanwhile, demand a complete pullout of NATO forces and the release of all prisoners of war. The Taliban are now in very high spirits; they believe that they are close to defeating the world's only superpower, the United States, having already defeated

the Soviet Union back in the 1980s. Meanwhile, democratic values in Afghanistan have crumbled under the onslaught of corruption and violence. Extremist ideology is gaining supporters in EU countries, with European Islamists flocking to Afghanistan or Africa for ideological and military training before returning to Europe to wage Jihad there.

The main source of the Taliban's financial stability is drug trafficking; it can survive any occupation and any regime. Satellite images indicate that the Taliban have repaired and extended the irrigation systems built in the 1950s, and are now using them to grow poppies. Their opium empire can become the basis of their economy and their philosophy.

Washington is now in talks with the Taliban; indeed, the Americans think it is a great achievement that the Taliban have agreed to open a representative office in Qatar. But that brings an element of uncertainty into American military planning, and raises concerns among Washington's Afghan allies and the country's ethnic minorities. The negotiations with the Taliban, which are being held in absolute secrecy, are a worrying rather than encouraging factor for countries in the region and for Afghanistan's minorities. These talks raise the prospect of the Taliban being given important positions in the Afghan government. How will that affect the people who fought them? Afghanistan's ethnic minorities are watching the talks with great unease, and will try to derail them if they possibly can. A new anti-Pashtun alliance called the National Front of Afghanistan (a new version of the old Northern Alliance) is quietly emerging in the north of the country. Several ethnic groups are forming with the assistance of the corresponding neighboring states: the Uzbeks, led by Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum; the Hazaras, led by Mohammad Mohaqiq; and the Tajiks, led by Ahmad Zia Massoud, the late Ahmad Shah Massoud's brother.

The U.S. Department of State, however, does not believe that there is a risk of a split along ethnic lines in Afghanistan. Maintaining ethnic representation in all government structures is thought to be an important principle—especially in the armed forces, where ethnic Pashtuns are thought to be underrepresented among the generals.

THE REGIONAL DIMENSION: WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF CENTRAL ASIA?

The ongoing talks with the Taliban create a lot of uncertainty for the Pentagon, which cannot make a final decision about what to do with the weapons and hardware it has brought to Afghanistan. On the one hand, if the talks fail, the Afghan forces trained by the international coalition will need modern weapons to keep the Taliban at bay. On the other, if the talks succeed, there is a good likelihood that the Taliban will be given many important posts in the Afghan government and in the armed forces. That raises the prospect of a very humiliating scenario: American weapons falling into the hands of extremists following a military coup. Speaking in a private interview, one Pentagon official said, ''We have some generals we can trust in Afghanistan—but there are not a lot of them, and they can lose control if the Taliban become part of the government.'' As a result, the talks with the Taliban, which have been dragging on for quite some time now, are forcing the American military to prepare for the unpredictable.

The Pentagon is beginning to realize that the weapons and hardware now being used in Afghanistan should be stored somewhere nearby. First, much of that hardware is worn out and is not worth the transportation costs. And second, it may be required once again at some point in the future to fight another war in Afghanistan or even in Central Asia.

Kyrgyzstan could be the best place to store the American weapons to be pulled out of Afghanistan. The country already hosts a key coalition transit center in Manas, and a Russian air base in Kant. This is where the railway from Russia terminates; from there cargos can be transshipped to Afghanistan via a network of northern railways. Kyrgyzstan also has all the necessary supplies and the specialists to repair and maintain military hardware. The country's advantages therefore include: the availability of transit hubs sitting on the crossroads of railways, motorways, and airways; Russia's interest in supporting the country's defense industry; and Washington's interest in keeping close by the weapons pulled out from Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan can essentially become a regional weapons depot. The Americans are now looking into the possibility of building a base in Batken Province, which borders on Tajikistan. According to plans drawn up by the U.S. State Department, the same site at the very heart of the unstable Fergana Valley could be used to host an anti-terrorist military training center.

The Americans have put out feelers regarding the possibility of transferring some military hardware to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—either for the use of these countries' armed forces, or merely for storage. The armies of the three Central Asian republics would be especially interested in sniper rifles, night vision instruments, communication equipment, and armed vehicles suitable for use in mountainous terrain. The international coalition also has lots of auxiliary hardware in Afghanistan, including heavy trailers, towing trucks, fuel tankers, tractors, specialized graders and bulldozers, water tankers, huge amounts of medical equipment, communication instruments, firefighting gear, and even mobile gyms.

To Afghanistan's neighbors the danger of the Taliban seems exaggerated. The Taliban are a known quantity, as is the military threat they pose, and all the risks of their ideological expansion have already been factored in. The United States is stoking up fears of the possible return of the Taliban, and the Central Asian republics play along with that well-paid-for sentiment. Their real fears are not that great, because they have already had to confront the Taliban in the past using only their own resources and Russian help. After 2014 they will still have all that, plus Western support. The U.S. campaign in Afghanistan is a massive economic enterprise: there are airfields being leased, there is the Northern Distribution Network, the helicopter lease arrangements, infrastructure projects for Afghanistan, weapons supplies—the scale of that enterprise is stunning to the residents of neighboring countries. To the Central Asian states, the war in Afghanistan has brought an upsurge in economic as well as political activity.

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These states fear a resurgence of the local Islamist movements—such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—more than they fear the Taliban. Another threat is the return to their home countries of terrorists who have become hardened in Afghanistan. The Kyrgyz military are preparing for the appearance in 2013–2014 of rebels armed with the idea of establishing a caliphate in the south of the country. The same rebels will also serve as conduits for new drug trafficking channels. Another source of ideological threat to the Central Asian republics is the Saudi and Qatari Arabs sponsoring the proliferation of aggressive forms of Islam. The Qataris are the main sponsors of Islamism in the mountainous regions of Tajikistan, where deep gorges serve as transit routes for drugs from Afghanistan, and where inaccessible terrain makes the central government almost powerless. In contrast, the Taliban lacks any messianic potential outside Afghanistan itself. But the Arabs who believe that the United States has been squeezed out of the country thanks to their financial and ideological support are now eager to launch a grand new mission in Fergana Valley and further afield in Central Asia.

THE FUTURE OF THE AFGHANISTAN-2014 PROJECT

Sources in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Central Asian republics say there are clear indicators that the United States has no intention of leaving Afghanistan completely after 2014. On the contrary, Washington will continue to ramp up its infrastructure in and around the country, with an emphasis on airfields, as well as aviation fuel delivery and storage systems in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. These storage facilities are needed to ensure an uninterrupted supply of aviation fuel to the coalition forces in Afghanistan, which are expected to burn through 367,000 tones of kerosene in 2012.

The Afghanistan-2014 project has a good chance of succeeding. After the withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan the country's government will be left in possession of an advantage which Afghanistan has never had before: the full support of every single state on the planet. The government will be confronted by the Taliban, which no country on the planet will dare support openly. The Taliban fighters are an effective force in guerrilla warfare—but they can hardly defeat the regular Afghan army, which is financed by some of the world's biggest economies and which has air support provided by the U.S. Air Force. In this war, an unreachable and all-seeing fighting machine will be pitted against the Taliban, who are living with their heads held proud but low.