

Fabrizio Vielmini

The SCO-Central Asian dimension of the Afghan crisis on the eve of ISAF retreat

The challenges of U.S. policy: Silk Road and Military bases

After the fall of the USSR, the U.S. has strived to establish its geopolitical presence in Central Asia underpinning its efforts with the imaginative concepts of a “**New Silk Road**” (NSR). Reformulated in July 2011¹, the idea promotes free trade and regional development joining the potential of the Central Asia Republics (CAR) with South Asia and the Middle East, especially through the construction of **communication networks** and, especially, energy infrastructures².

However, in order to positively affect regional stability, the U.S. strategy should have implied a parallel harmonization of the customs policies and border practices between the States of the region. Quite at the opposite, regional political institutions are fragile and stand in the way of the new corridors becoming a sound reality³.

The CAR authoritarian regimes have resisted regional coordination, while the U.S. has failed to establish a minimal State structure and internal reconciliation in Afghanistan⁴. The most probable result will be that the U.S. will focus its remaining forces on northern and western non-Pashtun provinces (mainly Tajiks and Uzbeks), a solution wished-for by senior figures in the U.S. dip-

¹ *Central Asia and the Transition in Afghanistan. A Majority Staff Report Prepared for the Use of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 112 Congress, 1st Session, 19 December 2011, <http://foreign.senate.gov/publications/>.*

² The main ones being the Central Asia-South Asia electricity scheme and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project.

³ M. TAHIR, *Washington's Silk Road Dream*, 1 August 2011.

⁴ A. RASHID, *Descent Into Chaos The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, Viking Press, N.Y., 2008, p. 484.

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Abstract

The never-ending power vacuum in Afghanistan continues to be the most critical factor to the security in Central Asia. This is due to two factors: the threats thriving on socio-economic and political turmoil of Afghanistan and the strategic agendas of the external actors involved in the crisis.

The resulting confrontation has defined the geopolitical profile of the region, underpinning the consolidation of the Shanghai agreement between the Russian Federation and China and the following U.S. led intervention in the region.

The anticipated withdrawal of NATO's military mission forestalls other major geopolitical changes in the regional balance, in a conjuncture that is further complicated by confrontation around Iran and Syria. In this context, the SCO countries will have to respond to a renewal of the activities of domestic insurgent groups and criminal activities. In the Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan Turkmenistan, hereafter termed as CARs,) the corruption of political life creates an environment conducive to the spread of extremism which in its turn open serious perspectives of State collapse.

This paper analyses the strategic consideration of the main players and the predicaments of the CARs in the context of wider regional geopolitical implications.

Fabrizio Vielmini, expert for the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

(* The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

diplomatic establishment⁵. However this prospects for the rest of the country to return to be a geopolitical black hole.

The above scenario stems as well from the U.S. misfortune to define a regional political framework for its project. This has emerged just another time in the proposal for a mechanism modelled on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) that the U.S. tried to propose through Turkey at the end of 2011. Washington could in such framework capitalize on increased ties with India⁶. However, the Asian players, among whom Iran is prevented by the sanction to be fully engaged, refused to agree to be encapsulated in a mechanism decided from outside⁷.

The reluctance of the major Eurasian powers to engage with Washington is also because in its regional enterprise the latter is even more concentrated in advancing security component in its cooperation with the CAR. Indeed, if a "silk road" took form it has actually been in the traffic of military items along the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a logistical scheme introduced since 2009 following the deterioration of the relations with Pakistan⁸.

Building on this effort, Washington has strived to expand its **military basing rights** in an attempt to maintain a key player position in the region even after NATO withdrawal⁹. In the last months, the U.S. has deployed an unprecedented diplomatic campaign to consolidate military-to-military relations with the five nations of Central Asia which reached its peak in the visit of the Secretary of State Clinton last February to **Kyrgyzstan** – where the U.S. are adamant in their will to maintain after 2014 the *Manas Transit Center* – and **Uzbekistan**, which has seen the removal of any restrictions (already symbolic in their nature) on military aid¹⁰.

In addition to transit and other fees paid to each Central Asian country for transporting equipment out of Afghanistan on NDN, the U.S. and British governments have dangled the prospect of **donating some of their military equipment** to their armies¹¹.

As a final point it should also be mentioned that Washington pursues its engagement with the CAR security sectors building up their **anti-drug capacities**. Always last year, the U.S. launched the "**Central Asia Counternarcotics Initiative**" (CACI). In this framework additional resources are poured into the security sector in addition to the millions that are provided to each CAR on bilateral basis¹².

⁵ R.D. BLACKWILL, *Plan B in Afghanistan. Why a De Facto Partition Is the Least Bad Option*, in «Foreign Affairs», No. 1, January/February 2011.

⁶ M.K. BHADRAKUMAR, *US's post-2014 Afghan agenda falters*, in «Asia Times Online», 4 November 2011.

⁷ Conference "Security and Cooperation in the Heart of Asia", Istanbul, 2 November 2011. See K.F. INDERFURTH - S. AMER LATIF, *India and Afghanistan: Positioning for Withdrawal*, in «U.S.-India Insight», November 2011.

⁸ The NDN nowadays delivers 75 per cent of the ground cargo needed by NATO troops in Afghanistan.

⁹ Last year, as part of an "adjustment in regional orientation", U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan have been realigned to focus on CARs, obtaining even permits to enter their territories on a "case-by-case" basis when conducting counterterrorism operations. D. TYNAN, *U.S. Special Forces' Operations in Central Asia Keeping Islamic Militants in Check*, Eurasianet, 15 March 2011.

¹⁰ D. JULDASEV, *Afghanistan - ličnaja vojna Islama Karimova*, 20 Marzo 2012, http://uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=top&cid=31&nid=19383.

¹¹ F. MASHRAB, *Western countries scramble for Afghan exits*, 23 Marzo 2012, http://atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/NC23Df03.html.

¹² In 2011, CACI was worth \$4.1 millions principally to seeks to establish vetted units and build counternarcotics task forces in the CARs. Also that year, through the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the U.S. allocated \$14 million to the region. Other 101 million went from the Pentagon In fiscal year 2010, the United States spent an estimated \$69 million on counternarcotics in Central Asia.

The threats to Central Asian countries originating from Afghanistan

The increased Western attention has major impact for the CAR as it excites the appetites and ambition of their regimes¹³, while the growing attention to the security sector creates a regional trend to militarization. What is more, the local regimes are prone to consider the Western presence only as a financial support and a guarantee to the status quo¹⁴.

This considerably impacts on their political internal dynamics, characterised by the challenge of radical Islamist opposition to the post-Soviet elites. Unable to deal with them in normal terms, the latter have pushed the Islamists – among whom stands out the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) – to regroup and do of Afghan regions a redeployment ground for insurgence activities.

The U.S. intervention disarticulated these groups for some years but they have been on the rise again since it has lost grip on the situation. Moreover, the raising importance of the NDN for the logistic of NATO's war effort has attracted the IMU to reorganize its bases in northern Afghanistan. The departure of coalition forces from Afghanistan will likely further exacerbate this trend leaving areas out of control and susceptible of being used as a springboard for armed groups incursions into Central Asia and China.

As reported by RF media, in the first three months of 2012 several detachments of gunmen were detected crossing into Tajikistan and establishing military bases near the Afghani-Tajik border¹⁵.

Drug trafficking from Afghanistan, the largest world supplier of heroin and other drugs that transit through the states of Central Asia¹⁶, further feeds these degenerative trends. As a result, an economy of drugs has consolidated in Central Asia entrenching itself in the local administrations. This accounts for the absence of effective response given that considerable sectors of the governments in both Russia and the Central Asian states are involved in drug trafficking.

Central Asia is particularly exposed to the combined threats of insurgents and traffickers because of its current geo-strategic configuration. Threats are naturally international given the precarious character of the **national boundaries**, large sections of which are un-demarcated, guarded by poor security forces and stretching along harsh mountainous terrains. Moreover, borders cut across **ethnic communities** and these links are used by traffickers and terrorist groups to spread around the region. This is a sensitive point also because the Atlantic strategy of redeployment towards North Afghanistan and the CARs is likely to shift the burden of the conflict on the trans-border ethnic communities of Tajiks and Uzbeks.

These problems reach their peak in the **Ferghana Valley**, a space left divided by the Soviet demise between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the three Republics that are most at risk of State collapse. The three countries have proved unable to settle any of the many trans-border problems affecting the life of half of the regional population, which lives concentrated in the valley and has been increasingly subject to islamisation. The opposition groups benefit from inter-states disputes as well as the degeneration of their political systems. Against this background, the Islamists can present themselves as the only political alternative to the existent state of things. Also the international conjuncture of the "Arab Spring" is such to inspire new recruits willing to overthrow

¹³ As the key player of the scheme Uzbekistan has raised transit tariffs by 1.5 times, a fact that has been met with irritation by NATO partners (French in particular). R. GENTE, *Le casse-tête du retrait d'Afghanistan*, 6 May 2012, <http://grotius.fr/le-casse-tete-du-retrait-d'afghanistan/>.

¹⁴ P. QUINN-JUDGE, *Conventional Security Risks to Central Asia: a Summary Overview*, in «China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly», Vol. 8, No. 2, 2010, pp. 53-63.

¹⁵ «Rossiiskaya Gazeta», 25 April 2012.

¹⁶ Despite a reduction due to a disease in opium poppy plants, Afghanistan continues to host the bulk – some 123,000 ha on 195,700 ha globally – of world opium cultivation. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report 2011*, UN Publication, 2011, p. 9.

the corrupt governments¹⁷. Although many Islamists profess non-violence, at least a part of them can radicalise by way of increased contacts with Afghanistan¹⁸.

With the largest and most porous border exposition on Afghanistan (1,200 km), the poorest and most fragile of the CARs¹⁹, **Tajikistan** is the deeply concerned by the scenarios opened by NATO retreat. Here, Afghanistan's turmoil already resulted in five years of civil war with Islamist opposition groups. Tajiks' trans-border ethnic links (they are the second largest group in Afghanistan) create the probability of refugees waves such to blow the fragile stability of the country. Even if flare-ups of violence are on the rise, the regime of President E. Rahmon seems more concerned in assuring its leverage vis-à-vis the Russian presence in the country²⁰. The Tajik case shows that the increased Western attention to local administrations is boosting their self-confidence externally as well as towards internal Islamic groups.

This trend, which is increasing the discontent among the disaffected youth, is clearly visible also in **Uzbekistan**. Even being the most problematic of the capitals in the region, Tashkent has continued to be the largest recipient of foreign security assistance as well. The regime has used this support to put pressure on its internal dissidents²¹, as well as on its neighbours, especially Tajikistan, against which it has applied an economic blockade that has frustrated Western plans for regional trade recovery.

On the other hand, with the largest security forces in the region, Uzbekistan may consider to be able to protect its national borders from the worsening situation in Afghanistan. Moreover, it could also attempt to expand its influence in the north of Afghanistan, especially if this area will be turned into the focus of the remaining Atlantic forces.

Kyrgyzstan, a state which has collapsed twice in five years, shows dynamics waiting to happen elsewhere in the region. The ephemeral rule of law of a failing state provides an easy transit route for traffickers and is a highly conducive terrain for extremist groups. The 2010 anti-Uzbek pogroms in the Kyrgyz South have left that large community (700,000) exasperated with the national authorities, a breeding ground for volunteers in insurgency. As the main U.S. basing point in the region Kyrgyzstan is traversed by serious geopolitical tensions. Between 2010 and 2011, a wave of terror attacks took place.

Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have a partially different way perspective on developments in Afghanistan.

While it remains one of the most isolated nations on earth, hardly an asset in the plans to improve the regional economic outlook, **Turkmenistan**, the only CAR out of the SCO, can boost its own neutrality by mediating between Afghan warring parties. Before 2001, it was the only country in the region able to maintain relations with the Taliban so it might consider that it will be able to find a *modus vivendi* with whatever political reconfiguration will emerge in the neighbour.

¹⁷ Ravil Kusainov, one of the leaders of the Soldiers of the Caliphate has declared in an interview that his organization consists of nationals from different countries (by his name, he should be himself a Tatar). He called on his supporters of different national origins «to draw lessons from the Arab Spring and get rid of their governments», <http://www.vesti.kz>, November 2010.

¹⁸ D.B. MALYŠEVA, *Central'noaziatskij uzul mirovoj politiki*, IMEMO RAN, Moskva, 2010.

¹⁹ ICG, *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, in «Asia Report», no. 205, 24 May 2011.

²⁰ What is visible by the way it stalls negotiations over the status of 201st Military Base after 2014. A. SODIQOV, *CSTO Agreement on Foreign Bases Frustrates Tajikistan's Ambitions*, in «Eurasia Daily Monitor», Vol. 9, No. 10, 16 January 2012.

²¹ U. HASHIMOVA, *Uzbekistan Considers the Strategic Implications of NATO's Drawdown In Afghanistan*, in «Eurasia Daily Monitor», Vol. 8, No. 210, 14 November 2011.

Thus, Turkmenians consider Afghanistan as an opportunity. Last April Ashgabat signed with Islamabad an agreement for the start of the construction of the TAPI pipeline²². However, a signature in itself means few in the history of a project under discussion for 16 years. And in the swinging strategic environment of the region, Turkmenistan which shares a large border (744 km) with Afghanistan and has connections with NATO can become a target of attacks.

Kazakhstan stands out as the most balanced diplomatic player in the region. Economically successful, it is able to deploy resources to assist Afghanistan through multilateral/international programs and projects – notably in providing education to some 1,000 Afghan students. Astana strives to maintain a neutral position with respect to the U.S. military strategy given its conflicting character with the Russian sponsored integration projects in the region for which Kazakhstan represents a fundamental element. But it risks as well remaining caught in between the increasing pressure from both sides²³. Moreover, the dynamic of the last months showed that even the secular Kazakhstan can become a target for Islamists attacks²⁴.

The Russian Position

After having supported the U.S. intervention in 2001, Russia has become increasingly adverse to the Western military presence in the region²⁵, considered as pretext to implement a far-reaching geopolitical agenda in opposition to its regional strategy. This aim at establishing supremacy in the security realm through a multilateral frameworks with the CARs: the **Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)**. The bloc is in a process to revise its capacities further in order to tackle the potential threats to come from Afghanistan. It has established effectively multilateral Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF), which are active in training exercises aimed at the prevention of possible incursions Afghanistan as well as possible internal popular uprisings. The CSTO foresees to assist Afghan security forces with training and equipment maintenance but it excludes however any direct deployment on the Afghan territory²⁶.

The CSTO face the risk not to be at the height of Moscow ambitions. Indeed when in 2010 the government of Kyrgyzstan called on the Russian Federation (RF) to intervene in stopping the inter-ethnic unrest in its southern regions, the CSTO failed to be effective²⁷.

Accordingly, the RF cannot wish for an overwhelming U.S. defeat and precipitous exit. As a matter of fact, the **RF territory is invested by the spill over** of the Afghan threats as it his happening in Central Asia²⁸.

But the tension remains together with the concrete possibility that the CARs once again will become an arena of competition between Russia and the West. At the CSTO summit of 2011, Russia obtained by its partners an agreement according to which, a foreign military presence in

²² V. PANFILOVA, *Turkmenija vyhodit v Južnuju Aziju*, in «Nezavisimaya Gazeta», 16 April 2012.

²³ Interview with experts of the Kazakhstani Institute Strategic Studies (KISI), Almaty, 30 March 2012.

²⁴ F. VIELMINI, *Il Kazakistan si scopre instabile*, in «limesonline», 20 gennaio 2012; F. SHARIP, *Militants Escalate Terrorist Attacks in Kazakhstan*, in «Eurasia Daily Monitor», Vol. 8, No. 211, 15 November 2011.

²⁵ At the point that the issue was raised directly in the pre-electoral foreign policy manifesto of Vladimir Putin: «In announcing his departure from this country in 2014, the Americans are building there and in neighboring States military bases, without a clear mandate, objectives and timing of their operation. We are, of course, not satisfied». V. PUTIN, *Rossija i menjauščijsja mir*, in «Moskovskie novosti», 27 February 2012.

²⁶ See I.J. JURGENS (ed.), *ODKB: otvetstvennaya bezopasnost'*, Institut sovremennogo razvitiya, Moskva, August 2011, p. 66.

²⁷ E. MARAT, *SCO's Tipping Point in Central Asia*, in «Eurasia Daily Monitor», Vol. 8, No. 116, 16 June 2011.

²⁸ As reported in the national press, spreading of Jihadist ideas and methods from Afghanistan took place via Kazakhstan into the Astrakhan region and the Caucasus. V. MYASNIKOV, *V Kazahstane vyrosli sobstvennye terroristy*, in «Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie», 18 November 2011.

the states of the CSTO is possible only with the consent of all the members. Formally a victory for Moscow, the document presents a loophole that, by way of different denomination (for example, “centre” instead of base) a republic could circumvent this condition²⁹. Such a case already happened with the U.S. base in Kyrgyzstan in 2009 unleashing tensions that eventually contributed to the change of the regime in Bishkek.

The point is that the Central Asian regimes consider the security confrontation between Russia and the West (and China as well) firstly as possibility of income for their national budgets and then as a strategy to balance each player’s influence.

The resulting latent tension affects as well the efficiency of drug trafficking prevention, considering that Moscow is trying to prevent the U.S. to implement autonomous initiatives³⁰.

In the end, Russia seems to be waiting for a NATO depletion, so to have it to accept a security **pact with the CSTO**, an arrangement that RF is proposing since at least the mid 2000.

China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

To China, the SCO means preserving Central Asia’s value as a **“strategic rear” for economic expansion and** access to energy resources. Accordingly, the Chinese tend to dismiss the security dimension while supporting Afghan reconciliation to secure its investments for infrastructure and mine exploitation.

Ideally, China would like to see a neutral Afghanistan after the American pull-out so that the U.S. manoeuvres to gain additional military footholds in the region are assessed as a threat to its national interests³¹. At the same time, China is disturbed by Russia’s confrontation with Washington, which it fears may also eventually result in the strengthening of the India. **Moscow and Beijing** have different priorities also in **assessing security threats**, the Chinese being much less concerned with narcotraffic. They increasingly compete for Central Asian assets thereby paving the way for the U.S. to exploit their cleavages to reorientate the CAR toward the south.

This explains why in eleven years the SCO never established a consequential mechanism for the **development strategy needed to overcome** the Afghan tragedy³².

The SCO has also a structural flaw in its capacity to broker negotiations for Afghan reconciliation, as the Taliban would hardly accept Russia and China as mediators, at least no without the direct involvement of Pakistan and Iran³³. Moreover, Tashkent, for a number of Afghan players even more disliked than Moscow and Beijing, with its support for the **“6+3” diplomatic initiative is also detrimental to the SCO’s** political unity³⁴. Also, enforcing a blockade against Tajikistan, the Uzbek regime is frustrating the potential of closer cooperation with Iran.

²⁹ A. GORBATOV, *ODKB izgonjaet amerikanske bazy: prikryli dver', no ščel' ostavili?*, 28 December 2011, <http://regnum.ru/news/1484812.html>.

³⁰ R. SOLASH, *Russia Said to Block U.S. Drug Plan amid Wariness over Central Asian Influence*, RFE/RL, 17 February 2012.

³¹ E. IVASHCHENKO, *Ekspert: Kitaj dolžen usilit' svoe vlijanie v Afganistane dlja zaščity svoih investitsij*, Ferghana.ru, 30 November 2011.

³² T. SINICINA, *Afghan test for SCO*, New Eastern Outlook, 25 March 2012.

³³ K.L. SYROEZKIN (ed.), *Central'naja Azija: faktory nestabil'nosti, vnešnie vyzovy i ugrozy*, KISI, Almaty, 2011.

³⁴ This collective endeavour unites the six countries bordering Afghanistan plus Russia and the U.S. under this UN umbrella were initiated the negotiations between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban from 1999 to 2001.

On the other hand, Moscow has also tried to activate a quadripartite format with Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in what seems just another attempt exclusive positions to the detriment of common solutions³⁵.

In the end, both Russia and China prefer to give the central role for the post-2014 phase to the United Nations. Nevertheless, **they are interested to maintain the SCO**, where nearly all the countries surrounding Afghanistan are either members or observers, as positive political platform for the resolution of the conflict and **an instrument for stability**, also with the anti-terrorist capacities developed with the organisation.

Conclusions: Afghanistan after 2014 in the larger geopolitical picture

The U.S. retreat from the control of Afghanistan security is set to accelerate a number of regional tensions all across surrounding regions and countries. This is even more probable given that, as most of the regional experts are convinced, the U.S. are at the same time establishing a long term military presence in Central Asia.

The parallel escalation of the confrontation with Iran worsens security and stability in the region as well as in the neighbouring Caspian and Caucasus theatres, as Teheran is prevented from playing a positive role. Moscow and Beijing are also pushed to seek opportunities to deceit and counteract the Western strategy instead of constructively engage.

The conjuncture is further complicated by the spreading of Sunni radical organisation whose traditional sponsors in the Arab monarchies are regrouping against **China and Russia** as supporters of Teheran³⁶.

But more generally, Central Asia is immersed in an indefinite conjuncture, where each step of all the regional powers is necessarily ambiguous for fear of the advantages of the other, as this situation concern as well **Pakistan**, pushed towards China and Russia, while **India** consolidates its association with the U.S. regional strategy in an opposing axe stretching up to Israel. As B. Rubin observed a decade ago, Afghanistan continues to be a mirror of the status of world politics, as the crossroad of all its tensions and a field for manipulation from the side of its major powers³⁷.

Facing this perspective, the only possibility for mitigating the negative tendencies would be to remove the factor that so far has been intrinsic of the United States approach in the region: the will to exclude some of the key players who surround it. Exactly this has prevented major player to act in a constructive way towards Afghan problems.

In this context, the SCO possesses a potential geopolitical significance but to express it the SCO should revise its institutional mechanism, including giving Pakistan and Iran full membership. From such platform, the SCO can create with the U.S., NATO and India the framework for a negotiated peace between the Afghan parties including all actors – internal and external – of the conflict. The emerging Afghanistan should have a **neutral status** under UN auspices.

³⁵ V. SOCOR, *Quadripartite Summit on Afghanistan Falls Short of Russian Expectations*, in «Eurasia Daily Monitor», Vol. 8, No.162, 6 September 2011.

³⁶ E. SATANOVSKIJ, *Ot Atlantiki do Afganistana – prostranstvo idušćih i buduščih voin*, in «Voenno-Promyšlennyj Kur'ier», no. 1 (418), 11 January 2012.

³⁷ B.R. RUBIN, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, Yale UP, New Haven & London, 2002.

For such an architecture to work there is a need for NATO to start a regional long-lasting and far-reaching **regional collaboration with Russia** in trying to avoid destabilizing processes which are in any case contrary to the main interests of the two sides³⁸.

Well founded Russian suspicious towards Western security involvement in the CAR should be removed. So that, especially from the side of the Europeans, an effort should be made to establish a common NATO-CSTO concept for the reform of the security structures of the CAR. The West should cease to be approached them mainly through the security sector and consider instead their potential as agents of development vis-à-vis their southern neighbours in the framework of educational, medical and other people-to-people activities³⁹, that can be supported by the EU in coordination with the RF.

The alternative to this is a whole region sinking into chaos, with militant activity to spread beyond Afghanistan affects neighbouring regions.

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Palazzo Clerici
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³⁸ C. BERTOLOTTI, *Il ruolo delle potenze regionali sulla politica di sicurezza dell'Afghanistan nell'era post-NATO*, CeMiSS, 2011.

³⁹ M. LARUELLE, *Involving Central Asia in Afghanistan's future – what can Europe do?*, EUCAM Policy Brief, No. 20, August 2011.