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UZBEKISTAN, A KEY PLAYER IN THE POST 2014 SCENARIO

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Uzbekistan has ambitions to become the most determinant regional middle power in Central Asia and it will play a key-role in the post-2014 scenario. This double land-locked country - surrounded by all other FSU Central Asian states and Afghanistan - is not a rich country in terms of energy resources and raw materials. Anyway, Uzbekistan is the biggest country for population (28 million people) with the most developed and largest army (nearly 50,000 strong) in post-Soviet Central Asia, keeping some power projection capability and an effective (and widespread) intelligence service. Since the late 90's, Uzbekistan is developing its armed forces even for asymmetric combat and laying emphasis upon small unit tactics and training for low-intensity conflict. This approach is functional to mountain/desert warfare scenarios and counter-terrorist operations, rather than combined-arms operations or peacekeeping missions. In Uzbekistan both domestic and foreign intelligence services are centralized in SNB (Sluzhba Natsionalnoy Bazapasnosti - National Security Service), a structure that reminds the former UzbSSR's KGB. SNB provides an advanced intelligence infrastructure and a good quality of agents operating domestically and abroad (especially in the Uzbek diaspora in Afghanistan) in collaboration with other foreign services (like Russia, India and China) and involving think tanks. This institution is fundamental for government policy-making.

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Uzbekistan wants to keep its strategic position among the other players in Central Asia; and Afghanistan represents the main scenario for the “Uzbek Great Game”¹. The imminent NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan – expected by 2014 but basically postponed to 2015 – represents the main potential threat to Uzbek security and a good opportunity to boost Tashkent regional influence.

Preventing infiltrations of terrorism, Islamism and criminality

Since the 90’s - when the Taliban threat was underestimated by Western governments - Tashkent was promoting a strategy to contain all the possible negative externalities from Afghanistan. After 9/11, Uzbekistan’s logistical² support to ISAF and its involvement in the first stage of the “Operation Enduring Freedom” became crucial, providing to US the important Kharshi-Khanabad military base (K2) until 2005³ and implementing a (logistical) collaboration with Western allied in the traditional bilateral agreements format.

Even if Tashkent is formally part of several regional organizations and initiatives⁴, Uzbekistan never renounced to its skepticism towards multilateral formats and kept opting out for an independent strategy made of unilateral initiatives and bilateral relations on security issues, preserving a zero sum mentality and a general lack of confidence in multilateralism⁵. Nowadays, Tashkent does not seem to advocate the

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¹ Despite the National Security Concept (1997) and the Defence Doctrine (2000) remain classified files, Afghanistan had been always cited by Uzbek leaderships as the main security priority.

² Tashkent supported logistically the US-NATO involvement in Afghanistan in facilitating ISAF’s Ground Lines of Communication (GLOCs) and opening up its territory as part of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), the way that provides supplies from northern Europe overland into Afghanistan.

³ After the Andijan massacre (13 May 2005), US called for an international inquiry, criticizing the ferocity of the repression ordered by Tashkent regime, and President Karimov quickly demanded for the withdrawal of American troops. The firm US-EU reaction by imposing trade sanctions and an arms embargo against Tashkent (later withdrawn in 2007), it cost a possible solid alliance with what could be vital NATO bridgehead in the region. Nowadays Uzbekistan is just hosting a German base in Termez.

⁴ As the OIC, TRACECA, CIS, CSTO, SCO, EurASEC (suspended), ECO, SPECA, CAREC, CARICC, CSATTF. Tashkent did not join another important regional organization as the SAARC.

⁵ There were some unsuccessful multilateral attempts promoted by Tashkent as the initiatives during the 90’s to mediate between Taliban and the Northern Alliance or the format promoted by Karimov in 1997 to create a 6+2 group in response to the civil war in Afghanistan. The 6+2 group included all states bordering Afghanistan - China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - plus the United States and Russia. In 2008, this format was extended to NATO, becoming “6+3 group”.

strengthen of Central Asian security to multilateral formats as the CSTO⁶ and SCO, preferring to keep bilateral, independent and multivector policies outside great power's influences and politico-military blocks⁷ in line with the Non Aligned Movement ideology. Operatively speaking, Tashkent implemented effectively just its own independent strategy to fight terrorism and to approach the Afghan knot.

Islamism represents the main challenging problem to contain outside Uzbek borders: the Hanafi madhaab Islam (generally moderate) is generally limited to social and cultural aspect within the communities; but radical Islam – as Wahhabism, 'imported' from Central Asian veterans stationed in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation - represents the biggest political challenge to Uzbek regime. Since 1991, during the Namangan islamist revolts, Karimov had to face the threats of radicalism and political extremism, hardly repressing any kind of radical manifestation - even controlling the religious society and its media in a country that is 88% muslim – and becoming “the most tenacious hunter of jihadists in Central Asia”⁸. The President declared a general war against international terror characterized by strong responses (sometimes excessive use of force), unilateralism and a not conciliatory approach with insurgents and their collaborators in Uzbekistan and abroad.

In this scenario, the main enemy became IMU – *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* – considered as a criminal and terrorist jihadi organization⁹.

⁶ Collective Security Treaty Organization is a intergovernmental military alliance created in 1992 among FSU countries. Uzbekistan became a full member just in 2006, criticizing a possible evolution that could transform the CSTO - mere collective organization of defence - in a NATO-like organization with new responsibilities and capabilities. Tashkent remained skeptical on the creation of KSBR - a force tasked with a counter-terrorist responsibility - and the KSOR - rapid reaction force - putting them under a (*de facto*) Russian command; or to transform the organization in a majority consensus system (loosing its veto power). In June 2012, Uzbekistan suspended its participation (and not its membership) within the CSTO. This coincide in a *de facto* exit, even if Tashkent may choose to indirectly support any CSTO military operation close to its borders.

⁷ Cf. R.N. MCDERMOTT, *Central Asian security post-2014. Perspectives in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan*, DIIS REPORT, 2013, p. 12.

⁸ Q. OVOZI, *Karimov Prepares For Terrorists*, RFE/RL, 24 January 2014.

⁹ Since 1991, Karimov harshly repressed IMU militants. They took refuge in Tajikistan and Kirghizstan establishing new operative bases. IMU declared a jihad against to overthrow the Karimov government and to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. The jihadist group was involved in the Tajik civil war (1992-1997), in ethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan and in terror bombings in Tashkent (February 1999). In August 1999, Tashkent responded with air strikes against IMU targets in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and unilaterally mined its eastern in late 1999, without notifying it to Bishkek and Dushanbe. A concise history of IMU is well resumed in M. STEIN, *Uzbekistan's View of Security in Afghanistan after 2014*, “Military Review”, May-June 2012.

In 2000 IMU was defeated by Uzbek troops and expelled from national territory. Since 2001, IMU has also changed its goals – focusing more in human and drug trafficking¹⁰ – and established its operative base in Afghanistan/Pakistan¹¹ with the support of local Taliban, becoming a regional problem fought even by Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kirghizstan forces. Since late 2000's, those remaining IMU militants are massing in the FATA along the Pakistani-Afghan border region¹² and are trying to reorganize the group recruiting not just Uzbeks but even Tajik, Turkmen, Kyrgyz and Uighur militants from Xinjiang. Recently IMU became part of the IMT – *Islamic Movement of Turkestan* – but this affiliation can be read as a sign of its weakness.

Nowadays, IMU lost its Uzbek soul and seems to be less effective than before. The SNB is currently monitoring the activity of those approximately 5000 IMU militants present in Northern Afghanistan¹³, trying to keep them and other groups out of Uzbek borders and preventing the recruiting of new members in Uzbekistan and abroad (as those Uzbek militants trained in Syria). Tashkent learned the lessons from the past and understood how to fight any possible infiltration in the country, strengthening its intelligence activities and the State Border Guard Committee with modern-minded personnel. In the last months, special divisions of Uzbek Interior Ministry and SNB have detained or placed under surveillance more than 7,000 suspected religious (or political) extremists¹⁴.

Ready for any scenario

Infiltrations of Islamism, terrorism and criminal activities from the Afghan border are not the only concerns of Uzbek authorities. At political level, the risks of a possible Taliban resurgence – that could fragment the state and topple the Kabul government, or the continuation of the present

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¹⁰ Mingling criminal goals with the jihadist agenda is a typical characteristic of terrorist organizations in Sahel (AQIM) and Central Asia (IMU). The war against drug smuggling through Uzbek borders is another main security priority for Tashkent government.

¹¹ This turning point was partly due to the deaths of the cofounders Juma Namangani (2001) and Tahir Yuldashev (2009). Anyway, it seems that IMU never lost its Central Asian agenda: in 2004 extremists affiliated to IMU detonated bombs and attacked police in Bukhara and Tashkent; and in 2009 the Tajik authorities announced IMU infiltrations in its territory (Rasht and Talvidara valleys) and the murder of 23 Tajik soldiers (September 2010).

¹² H. KHAN, *IMU militants flock to Pakistani-Afghan region*, Central Asia Online, 28 August 2013.

¹³ S. SAADI, *Uzbekistan works to bottle up IMU in Afghanistan*, Central Asia Online, 19 March 2014.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

(de facto) civil war – with negative implications for Central Asian security is warning Uzbekistan more than anything. In several occasions, Uzbek authorities announced that they are preparing a hard response for the worst-case scenario.

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Whenever the conflict is resolved by the next Afghan [Ahmadzai/Abdullah?] administration, Tashkent is ready to collaborate to reconstruct and to develop the country on the long run, and promoting the creation of a “New Silk Road”¹⁶. Uzbekistan is already an important economic and trade¹⁷ partner for Afghanistan and its main supplier of electric energy (1.2 billion kW/hours per annum). The Uzbek involvement is important even at infrastructural level through the important Hairaton Bridge that crossing the Amu Darya establishes the lonely international rail route (Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif) that links Afghanistan with the rest of the world. Further, Tashkent promoted the reconstruction of eleven bridges between Mazar-i Sharif and Kabul and the first Afghan optic fiber

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¹⁵ Tashkent has special relations with two prominent figures of Northern Afghanistan: Atta Mohammed - an ethnic Tajik, former military commander under Ahmed Shah Massoud and governor of Balkh province since 2004 – demonstrated his loyalty to Tashkent. More influent could be Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek that created in 1992 the *Junbesh-i Milli-yi Islami* (National Islamic Movement), an Uzbek militia composed by former jihadis and previous supporters of Mohammad Najibullah. Just in 1993, Dostum was personally commanding a force of about 120,000 men, controlling most of the north of Afghanistan until 1998 and obtaining support from President Karimov, who was hoping to secure a buffer zone on Uzbekistan’s southern borders. Cf. J. KUCHERA, *Russia, Uzbekistan Floating Plans To Create “Buffer State” In Afghanistan*, Eurasia.net, 4 April 2014. For the 2014 Afghan Presidential elections, Dostum is candidate as first vice president supporting the candidacy of Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai. This would result the best Uzbek option in post-Karzai Afghanistan.

¹⁶ Washington is promoting this idea of “New Silk Road” economic projects, to develop Afghanistan and Central Asia integrating in a regional wide web these isolated realities in strategic issues as transportation, trade, investments, energy and communications. Cf. J. MANKOFF, *The United States and Central Asia after 2014*, CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program paper, January 2013; Cf. F. STARR, *A ‘Greater Central Asia Partnership’ for Afghanistan and its Neighbors*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, Washington, March 2005.

¹⁷ From 2002 to 2009, bilateral commerce increased almost ninefold amounting to US\$ 877 million; and Uzbekistan represented nearly a quarter of Afghanistan’s total international transactions. Cf. ECO Secretariat.

network in 2009. Uzbek authorities' aim - to connect with other regions in Afghanistan and to reach the lucrative and expanding South Asian markets - seems to represent an excellent opportunity to Tashkent.

The Uzbek role in the NATO withdrawal

At military level, after relations deteriorated with the US in 2005, Tashkent started to reinforce its connections with China and Russia (instead of isolating the country); while Washington kept using just the southern routes of supply from Karachi ports. However, the instability and the worsening of the security in Pakistan, as well as the deterioration of Washington-Islamabad relations – culminated in the incident of November 2011 when U.S. forces mistakenly killed 24 Pakistani soldiers – pushed NATO allies to reconsider the northern routes through Central Asia for the complex¹⁸ and expensive¹⁹ withdrawal operations. Excluded the withdrawal routes through Pakistan, the hostile Iran, the neutral Turkmenistan, the instable Tajikistan, the competitor China and the very expensive air bridges; it is evident how this NATO withdrawal would be realized mainly through Uzbekistan.

This strategic advantage led the West to move closer to Tashkent. Karimov, in turn, got a strong counterpart in economic and political terms as the important transit fees and the significant softening of the Western criticism towards its regime (especially on human rights violations). This rapprochement between Tashkent and the Western Allies finds an agreement on the modalities of withdrawal and the need to fight the common enemy of radical Islam as a priority strategic imperative for both parties.

The 'northern option' will provide additional (millionaires) expenses in the final budget of the NATO operations and results as a good business for Central Asia countries that can get consistent transit fees in money or 'in nature', acquiring a part of the transited materials. This option was welcomed by Pentagon that – instead of paying huge shipping cost – can unload excess military supplies to Western allies at no cost. Tashkent

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¹⁸ These operations will involve a range of actors very heterogeneous (public/private, civil/military and national/international) to evacuate offensive military equipment, 98,000 men, 80,000 vehicles and more than 125,000 containers from Afghanistan. Furthermore, there is not a common plan to coordinate the operations but a complex net of bilateral agreements among every NATO member and the Central Asian transit countries. Cf. R.M. CUCCIOLLA, *Il complesso ritiro della Nato dall'Afghanistan: l'opzione uzbeka*, CeSI Brief Report, 16 luglio 2013.

¹⁹ A withdrawal through the Central Asia 'northern route' provides, however, a huge cost (about \$ 17,500 per container, compared to the 7,200 of the Pakistani southern maritime route) which could further increase if the Central Asian countries decide to raise the transit fees.

understood that could even exploit the withdrawal to low-cost modernize its forces: in fact, Uzbeks require not just weapons and ammunitions but even military technology as mine detectors, helicopters, navigation equipment, trucks, armored vehicles, UAVs (even with strike capability) and night vision goggles²⁰.

Just in February 2012, Tashkent expected to receive \$1.5 million in military aid and access to excess defence articles (EDA); and in 2013 – during a meeting in Washington between Uzbekistan’s Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry – it was formalized the opportunity to transfer parts the military equipment used in Afghanistan to Uzbekistan²¹. Even Islamabad – that is recently bettering its relations with US – is requiring part of that military equipment and is competing against Tashkent over those \$7 billion worth of US armored vehicles and other equipment now in Afghanistan²².

Conclusions: weaknesses and strengths of future Uzbekistan

We have just considered the attitudes of a country that wants to emerge as a credible middle power in Central Asia. However, Tashkent regime has to face several challenges at domestic and international level. Uzbekistan should go over its Soviet-like shape – and identity – and get an effective transition at political and economic level to the efficient open society. Considering the experience of Arab springs and the complex ethno-clanistic composition of Uzbek society, in the globalized world the risks of self-referential authoritarianism could be fatal for Uzbek regime and the state survival²³. Further, the system presents some internal fragilities for mere biological reasons: the succession of power of a leader born in 1938 probably will not follow a ‘dynastic line’²⁴ – even if there is a strong family struggle²⁵ – and Uzbekistan has to find a Karimov’s successor that will

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²⁰ J. KUCERA, *Uzbekistan to Get US Night-Vision, GPS, Body Armour*, EurasiaNet, 2 February 2012.

²¹ Cf. E. AKHMADOV, *NATO to Transfer Military Equipment From Afghanistan To Uzbekistan*, CAC Analyst, Field Report, 27 March 2013.

²² T. CRAIG, *Pakistan eyes U.S. military equipment in Afghanistan*, “The Washington Post”, 17 March 2014.

²³ Cfr. N.J. MELVIN, *Uzbekistan: Transition to Authoritarianism on the Silk Road*, Harwood Academic, Amsterdam, 2000.

²⁴ Analysts think that Karimov wants to identify, in total privacy, an external element to the ‘royal family’ that could pursue the compromise between clans and elite. The three ‘outsider’ favorite candidates are Rustam Inoyatov, head of SNB; Shavkat Mirziyayev, current Prime Minister; and Rustam Azimov current finance minister.

²⁵ The eccentric Karimov’s elder daughter Gulnara seemed to be the designated “heir to the throne” just a few years ago; but she became an opposition figure to her father’s regime after her marginalization at the end of 2013. Gulnara accused her mother and her younger sister Lola to plot against her with the help of SNB. Cf. A. BARIŞ, *Uzbek first daughter Gulnara Karimova strikes back at recent claims*, “Hurriyet Dailynews”,

probably not change the regime shape in the middle term.

In Uzbekistan, there is not a political alternative coming from the civil society, and only the elites could be able to constitute counter-powers. In these years, Karimov was able to control and contain them, replacing the politico-administrative cadres with figures that would not represent possible threats. For this reason, we could exclude elite-led protests and dynamics typical of the colored revolutions in the next years²⁶. Also Karimov's wife – Tatyana Akbarovna Karimova – is now working as a Cardinal Mazarin to the regime stability; while SNB represents the last instance warrant of the Republic unity.

Uzbekistan primarily wants to strengthen its border and counter-terrorist capabilities through a modernization of the armed forces. Anyway, some analyst are skeptical to support and further enhance the Karimov regime in military terms, fearing a general rearmament in a context of latent tensions as Central Asia. The risk of an armed conflict between Uzbekistan and its eastern neighbors – Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – for the disputes over water and electricity supply²⁷ is serious.

Given the general power vacuum (and the related safety hazards) that will be left in Central Asia after the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan; the lack of credible multilateral initiatives like CSTO and SCO and the terrorism, radical Islamism and organized crime threats, it's clear how a 'strong Uzbekistan' must be the last instance regional warrant. Therefore, Tashkent should assume major responsibility towards those instable states like Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan²⁸ and Afghanistan.

Karimov was enough skilled to play a role on a par with Moscow, preserving good relations and breaking the historical bond of dependency with Russia. However, if Uzbekistan really wants to become a

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8 December 2013.

²⁶ Cfr. S. RADNITZ, *Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-Led Protests in Central Asia*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2010.

²⁷ Water and energy are two strongly intertwined elements: in the USSR planned economy, these two sources were interconnected and integrated in a common system that worked well until Soviet collapse. The "downstream countries" - Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan - got water from "upstream" Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for irrigation in the summer. In exchange, they had to provide energy – due to their fossil fuel provisions - during winter. Once the Soviet Union dissolved, Eastern and South Asian markets were open to energy-rich Central Asian states and even Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan opted to exploit their water resources by themselves, building dams and becoming energy exporter to Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. The rivalry is mostly about shifting the distribution of water in Central Asia and a possible restriction of needed water to Uzbekistan rather competition for energy supply.

²⁸ Dushanbe has recently renewed the military alliance with Moscow until 2042, so delegating the Tajik internal security to Russian Federation. This creates a dependency link similar to that of Najibullah's Afghanistan.

determinant and credible regional power, it should promote the pacific resolution of those water, energy and territorial disputes with its neighbors, avoid a possible autarchic isolation and start to play in positive sum mentality and multilateral-cooperative approach to regional security.