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*Afghanistan and Central Asia Looming priorities and regional un-balances: Policy Background Paper*

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NATO's Resolute Support Mission is currently engaged in training, advising and assisting the Afghan security forces and institutions, in order to strengthen the state-building process and to enhance military capabilities of the national army to react against destabilising threats. The RSM's presence is not limited to Kabul but is felt in different regions of the country (also in the Kandahar southern region and in the western region bordering Pakistan, where the activities of Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan militants are particularly relevant), in order to assure a close co-operation with national authorities and to support their efforts for political stability and security. In this respect, the new government in Islamabad could provide a more effective assistance across the border.

Following the NATO summit held in Brussels in July 2018, the North Atlantic Alliance reaffirmed its commitment to ensuring long-term security and stability in Afghanistan after the end of ISAF by the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2014. The Alliance recognised in the final declaration that *“regional actors have an important role to play in support of peace and stabilization in Afghanistan, and we call on them to cooperate more closely on fighting terrorism, to improve the conditions for economic development, to support the Afghan government's peace and reconciliation efforts”*.

Regional security and stability are indispensable to developing economic cooperation and trade corridors crossing the Eurasia region. The engagement of Central Asian presidents to increase regional cooperation through a progressive improvement of their bilateral relations is an ongoing process which is producing positive results, especially in the economic and trade fields with an impact also on regional security: Afghanistan's involvement in a regional framework of economic and trade cooperation would also enhance the potential role of the country as a geographic hub for railway links and other infrastructural projects.

The current attempts to foster a dialogue with the Taliban - promoted in different ways by Russia, Uzbekistan and China - intend to achieve the pacification of Afghanistan in order also to involve the Taliban in the containment of the IS-K infiltration into the region. However, the concrete and genuine engagement of the Taliban in the pacification process must be carefully evaluated and monitored, avoiding rising tensions with Kabul's government and with the colliding interests of Central Asian secular republics.

In this respect, the multifaceted role of UN in supporting the peace process, an effective rule of law and the coordination of the international community's in support of the country continue to be essential, also because the wider strategic backdrop is far from predictable.

Central Asian states, despite the continuing engagement of the United States and NATO with the

Resolute Support Mission, still have serious concerns due to Afghanistan's lasting instability. Kabul is perceived as the main source of threats to regional security and the risk of spill-over appears very serious: growing cross-border armed incursions of terrorists could trigger dangerous political instabilities in Central Asia, while drug and weapons trafficking already has a devastating social impact. The aggravation of security in Northern Afghanistan has profoundly worried neighbouring Central Asian countries; in the last three years, the provinces of Balk (close to the Uzbek-Afghan border), Kunduz and Badakhshan (bordering Tajikistan) and Faryab (adjacent to Turkmenistan) have become targets of Taliban offensives.

Furthermore, the return of Takfiri Central Asian fighters from the Middle East contributes to a worsening regional security situation. According to the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, nearly 3.000 Central Asians militants have been trained to fight in Syria and Iraq, either as affiliated of the Islamic State (mainly Tajik and Kazakh fighters) or of the Qaedist al-Nusra Front (mainly Uzbek and Kyrgyz fighters).

The recent clashes between the Taliban and the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) fighters in some provinces of northern Afghanistan further complicate the efforts to build regional security and stability: this rivalry expresses clearly the strong divergence between global and national aims followed by these two actors – between the global idea to create a transnational Islamic caliphate (IS-K) and the national perspective backed by the Taliban, as occurred in the past between Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

However, Central Asian governments, as well as the international actors involved in the region, often downplay the fact that the main threats to the regional stability and security are linked to endogenous issues and unsolved internal problems insisting rather that they derive from Afghanistan. As a matter of fact, by analysing all events of violence in Central Asia after independence – the Tajik civil war in the mid-1990s, the Andijan's events in 2005, the two revolutions in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010, the Uzbek-Kyrgyz interethnic clashes in Osh in June 2010, the riots in western Kazakhstan in 2011 or the fighting in Tajikistan in the Rasht Valley (2010) and Khorog (2012) – we can observe that the source of these troubles is evidently a combination of local factors.

In the meantime, Russia has tried hard to use bilateral cooperation and multilateral institutions such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in order to shape the Eurasian security environment. Within the CSTO framework, Moscow wants to play the role of regional security provider through joint military exercises, the delivery of modern military equipment at Russian internal prices and the presence of CSTO military bases in two Central Asian republics (the Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan and the Russian 201st Motor Rifle Division in Tajikistan). However, Russia's annexation of

Crimea and the explosive crisis with Ukraine have heavily damaged Russia's image in Central Asia, spreading serious concerns about Russian integration projects in the security field.

Another potential important actor is China, due to its infrastructural projects within the Belt and Road Initiative, and in fact, the achievement of a long-term regional security and stability has become one of the main drivers of Beijing's foreign policy. On the other hand, China cannot establish military bases because CSTO members have to be unanimous in accepting them or because national policy excludes the possibility (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). So China tries to build a base along the Afghan-Tajik border and promotes the new security "Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism" (including Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan).

That said, both multilateral organisations CSTO and SCO (Shanghai Co-operation Organisation) were inactive during the inter-ethnic clashes in Osh (Kyrgyzstan) in 2010, involving Uzbek and Kyrgyz, because they are able to respond to external threats but not internal conflicts or between member-states.

The coming year could offer some progress in Afghan domestic negotiations, provided that all regional and external actors achieve reasonable compromises on different political and strategic interests.

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