The SCO and Post-War Afghanistan: New Challenges to Regional Cooperation

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1. Historical background

Historically, Afghanistan was part of Central Asia\(^1\). Composed of steppes and mountainous areas, historically, there were no real borderlines dividing its territory. Although Afghanistan appears as a political entity in the 18th century, the rest of the region would only be effectively inserted in the international system after the Soviet Union expansion towards it.

Central Asia represents the connecting link between these East and West, an Empires channel of communication, but also target of dispute among different empires. It has been so since the ancient Silk Road, passing through the Turkic Empire, by Genghis Khan and his Mongol’s expansion, through the period of the Great Game between the Russian Empire and Great Britain. Today, the so called New Silk Road and New Great Game reflect its historical role.

Afghanistan is the materialization of this duality since its early history. As a trading and passage hub, it was part of a Eurasian land corridor. As a theater of war and disputes, it was an instability focus. Created as a buffer state, its stability always meant stability for the entire region.

From this point, the history of Central Asia and Afghanistan develops and goes to the present day. What is the role that the region’s countries and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are going to take in Afghanistan’s stabilization? What is the SCO’s real significance?

1.1. Early History

Located in a vast territory, mostly barren and mountainous, Central Asia has always been a pathway for traders, explorers and conquerors from different nationalities: Greeks, Chinese, Turks, Mongols, Persians and Arabs left marks still visible today. The Turkic language, disseminated at the time of the Turkish invasion in the 8\(^{th}\) century, the Islamic religion brought by the Arab invasions

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1 Central Asia is the core region of the Asian continent and stretches from the Caspian Sea in the west to China in the east and from Afghanistan in the south to Russia in the north.
in the 7th century and the socio-cultural Persian influence - established by the Timurid Empire of Tamerlane - are examples of such broad influences (Khanna 2008; Guimarães, et al. 2010; Silva 2011).

China’s influence in the regions dates back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC), when the first Chinese incursions on the current territory of Xinjiang occurred (Karrar 2009). Central Asia has become part of the Chinese tributary system, which encompassed great part of Eurasia. In the early 9th century, Turkic people (Gok Turk) migrated from northern China to the Central Asian region, leaving their traces in the region. During this period, coming from the west of the Eurasian continent, the Arabs invasions brought the Islamic religion to Central Asia. Nevertheless, Islamism would only become popular in the early 11th century (Silva 2011).

Almost two centuries later, the Mongol Genghis Khan conquered the region and formed the largest empire the world had ever seen, stretching from Poland to Korea, consolidating the so-called Pax Mongolica. The region’s unification and pacification allowed reestablishing of the famous Silk Road, which connected China to Europe through Central Asia. Later, however, the Mongol Empire was divided into several khanates, which lasted until the Russian conquest of the region. Akhanate had an organization similar to a tribe or a kingdom and was commanded by a khan.

It was only in the 14th century that the region would be put again under the same administrative unit. Tamerlane dominated the region, establishing the Timurid Empire. In addition, he was the first Muslim emperor to dominate the region, with his death the region was once again divided into several khanates (Burghart e Sabonis-Helf 2004).

Afghanistan appeared for the first time as an unified political entity in 1747, when the Durrani Empire was founded. It gained its independence from the Persian and Moghul empires, and adopted an aggressive stance towards them, expanding itself until becoming the second biggest Islamic empire in the world at the time, after the Ottoman Empire.

1.2. The Great Game

Since the 15th century, the Russian Empire had been attempting to expand towards the Mongol Empire in the South. However, it was Peter the Great, in the 18th century, who finally put the region under Russian control. The expansion to the Caucasus, Crimea and the Kazakh steppe demonstrated some important issues: first, the Russian desire to obtain control over hot water harbors (the Black Sea, an output to the Mediterranean); second, the perception of Central Asia’s economical

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2 Known nowadays as the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, it is the largest Chinese province, located in the far West of the Chinese territory and bordering Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, among others.

3 The expression “tributary system” refers to a set of states connected by power relations between them in which, unlike an empire, the stronger state does not attach the weak ones directly, but manages them by taxes in order to make them subordinate, although leaving with relative autonomy in their business.
importance in agricultural production, cattle breeding and mineral extraction; third, the Russian attempt to control the Turkish straits trade lines of the (mainly Byzantium); and finally, the intention to expand the Empire to the Indian Ocean, gaining control over the important ports in the region (Silva 2011).

Simultaneous to the Russian ambitions, Great Britain conquered India, establishing its most important colony, since it had recently lost the thirteen American colonies. Russian expansionism was perceived as a threat to Great Britain’s commerce, which was led by the East India Company. Furthermore, the Englishmen had great interests in the mineral resources under Central Asia’s soil, insofar as they were the biggest industrial empire at the time (Hopkirk 2006).

The dispute that arose between the Russian Empire and the British Empire came to be known as the “Great Game”, a denomination immortalized in the words of Rudyard Kipling (Hopkirk 2006; Silva 2011). Russian expansion to the boarders of the “heartland” was blocked mainly by England: towards the Atlantic Ocean by closing the North Sea; English presence in the Mediterranean Sea guaranteed the control of the straits (mainly Dardanelles); and towards south, occupying the regions of India and Persia (Spykman 1944). As Russia expanded towards south, the British Empire pressured to the north, from India.

The main conflicts that erupted during the Great Game took place in Afghanistan. The competition between England and Russia led to efforts to put and maintain in power governments which were favorable to them. Such disputes undermined the political and military power of the Durrani Empire, leading to its decline. Russians fought the British in Afghanistan both with military incursions and espionage, as well as diplomatic maneuvers and economic investments in order to constrain local elites. England fought three wars in Afghanistan to put friendly governments in power. With the signing of the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, Afghanistan officially became a buffer state between the Russian Empire and the British Empire. Achievements on both sides were recognized, ending the Great Game (Guimarães, et al. 2010).

1.3. Soviet Union and the War in Afghanistan

After the outbreak of the 1917 Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union, the Russians divided Turkestan4 and the steppes in Soviet republics. The region was modernized and industrialized, replacing the tribes and nomadic groups by a centralized bureaucratic state. The creation of Central Asia current dominant class dates this period: a soviet elite, based in secular policies, replacing the former Islamic and nomad elite. The region served as the USSR’s ‘backyard’, feeding its booming war industry. The steppes served as granary for the Russians, producing grain and cotton, as well as source of mineral resources. Several industries were

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4 Persian term, literally meaning “Land of the Turks”, never called an administrative unit of one nation, but, with the fall of the Persian and Russian Empire dominance of the region, the territories south of the Kazakh steppes of Central Asia were called Turkestan by Russian managers.
created in the period, but the most profitable were aimed at producing weaponry-related goods. (Silva 2011).

Afghanistan, a former buffer state, began to align itself with the Soviet Union in the middle of the 20th century. The main reason involves Pakistan: with the English withdrawal of India and the creation of Pakistan, Afghanistan claimed the northwest of Pakistan, since the Pashtun people occupied the whole region. Pakistan defends the maintenance of the Durand Line, the border line agreed during the 19th century to separate Afghanistan to the British-ruled India, but Afghanistan affirms it divides arbitrarily the Pashtun tribes (Katzman 2013, 47). Disputes between both states started, leading to a trade blockade, which damaged deeply Afghan economy. Looking for salvation, Afghanistan strengthened its ties with the USSR (both by signing trade treaties, as sending military officers to train in the country), while the United States refused to sell armaments to the country, despite sending military aid to Pakistan (Hammond 1987, 24-25).

Fearing a new communist nation, the United States, supported mainly by Britain and Saudi Arabia, began financing clandestinely warlords (Mujahideen) that opposed Afghanistan central government (Dini 2013) in order to weaken the pro-Soviet regime (Osinaga 2005). After the overthrow of President Nur Taraki by the opposition, the USSR provided military aid to the government, starting the Afghan War of 1979. The war lasted until 1989 and was a crucial point of the Cold War, representing a symbol of Soviet decay (Vizentini 1998). Its legacy is still visible to this day, in the emergence of terrorist groups created by mujahideen and trained by the United States to counter the USSR. With the end of the Soviet Union and the difficulty of controlling its borders, there was a huge overflow of such destabilizing factors to adjacent regions.

With the end of the USSR, a vacuum of power in the region emerged and the former Soviet republics of the region became independent, forming the current Central Asian configuration of States. These new states were Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

1.4. The Post-Soviet Period

The collapse of the USSR had disastrous consequences to the new Central Asian states. Its economies faced high unemployment rates due to the its structural dependence of USSR demand: poverty, corruption and crime levels raised. This, as shown by Hasan Karrar (2010), leaded to a restoration of Pan-Turkik movements, which found a fertile ground in the region.

Kyrgyzstan was the country that suffered the most from this situation, due to its economy’s focus on the Soviet-military industry. However, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan also went through a severe crisis. Kazakhstan was less affected because it succeeded in establishing strategic partnerships involving energy resources with Europe and China, easing the agricultural demand fall (Silva 2011).
Officially, local elites are secular and many of them are anti-Islamic. Religious organizations have been banned in almost every country in the region, pushing them to illegality. These organizations have been aggregating a lot of unsatisfied people, since they consider the regimes authoritarian. Most of the manifestations are peaceful, but there are also extremist and more radical groups, which resort to violence in many cases, especially in Uzbekistan. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, for instance, is an extremist organization responsible for being the primary source of opposition to the government since the 1990s, been responsible for several extremist acts in the country, and also in the neighborhood, mainly in Kyrgyzstan (Khanna 2008).

During the 1990s the United States also sought to establish partnerships with the region’s governments. Results were favorable in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with which the country forged important ties. The U.S. had more difficulty in dealing with Tajikistan, as the country plunged into civil war for almost the entire decade. The country have been strategic Russia’s strategic partner since this time, been the home of 25,000 Russian soldiers (Gleason 2001). Furthermore, Tajikistan is the only Central Asian country to recognize an Islamic political party in its internal political scenario, including it in the decision taking processes. As for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as they are considered undemocratic by the U.S., there was a low level of cooperation between the countries (Guimarães, et al. 2010).

In Afghanistan, with USSR and its Afghan ally’s collapse in 1989 and 1992, the Mujahideen took power, declaring Afghanistan an Islamic State for the first time in its history (Saikal 2004, 209), bringing hope of peace for the people and for its neighbors. However, these expectations were not fulfilled: due to conflicts between different Mujahideens, power disputes delayed the state building process. Simultaneously, Pakistan showed concerns with the idea of an Afghanistan allied to the west, since the country has rich natural resources, such gold, gas and oil. In 1994, with this in mind, but initially with the allegation that a Pakistani convoy en route to Central Asia would need protection, Pakistan’s Minister of Interior, Neseerullah Babar, recruited, trained and armed a number of madrasa5 students to join a few former Pashtun Mujahideen fighters. This group, which assumed the name ‘Taliban,’ immediately received approbation of Pakistan’s military leadership, ensuring protection, training sites and armaments. According to Amin Saikal:

[…] as the militia’s territorial control expanded, its political-ideological agenda made it explicit that their ultimate goal was to transform Afghanistan into a ‘pure Islamic Emirate’ as a prelude to achieving wider regional objectives. […] They also allowed poppy cultivation, heroin production and drug trafficking […] as the best revenue raising means to help finance their territorial conquest and political and ideological impositions (Saikal 2004, 222).

5 Madrasa is the most common type of Islamic educational institution.
These events led to a Civil War that erupted in 1996, opposing the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. In the end, the Taliban took over power and ruled the country until 2001. An extremist government in the region served to disseminate fundamentalism across its borders. Afghanistan served as training ground for extremists throughout Central Asia, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (Hizb-ut-Tahrir), and meant a constant threat to the safety of adjacent systems (Silva 2011).

1.5. The Emergence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

In this context of growing destabilization related to extremist movements fed by Afghanistan’s Civil War, the Chinese government took the initiative of founding the group of the Shanghai Five. In 1996, the founding date of this group, and in 1997, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed treaties to establish confidence-building measures in border areas, such as the reduction of military contingents allocated in borderlands (Khanna 2008). According to Haas (2007), this can be considered the first phase of institutional development of the SCO, characterized by confidence-building measures and security.

It is noteworthy that this rapprochement between China and Russia was largely driven by the search for U.S. nuclear primacy, demonstrated by statements from President George W. Bush and the initiative to build a missile shield in Europe. Such dispositive would nullify Russia and China nuclear deterrence capabilities, consolidating U.S. unipolarity and preeminence in military issues (Piccolli 2012). This explains the counterintuitive rapprochement between powers that on several occasions had conflicting interests, and still have them. Another important factor was Afghanistan’s spillover effects that increased instability throughout the region (Visentini 2012). It is central, in the creation of the SCO, the role of Afghanistan (Vorobiev 2012). As put by Kenneth Katzman,

The Central Asia countries have long had an interest in seeing Afghanistan stabilized and moderate. In 1996, several of the Central Asian states banded together with Russia and China (...) because of the perceived Taliban threat (Katzman 2013, 55).

SCO’s second phase of institutional development began with its creation in 2001 by the Shanghai Five along with Uzbekistan and extended until 2004, when the organization became more consolidated (Haas 2007). This phase, as well as the creation of the SCO itself, relates to the U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which had the support of all countries of the SCO.

One month after the September 11 attacks, the United States invaded Afghanistan, aiming the overthrow of the Taliban government, which was an Al-Qaeda declared ally. In a short time this objective was achieved, through an
intense bombing campaign and an incursion combined with a Northern Alliance offensive. From this moment on, war efforts focused more on nation building and counterinsurgency efforts (Katzman 2013). Afghanistan current president, Hamid Karzai, supported by the U.S., reached the power in 2002. Along with him, the Northern Alliance occupied most of the political offices. Despite this apparent unity, many issues divide that current elite, such as islamic positioning, woman rights, Pashtun representativeness and defence matters.

Some Central Asia countries allowed the creation of American bases on their territories, as was the case of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and other States only allowed air traffic of the Coalition aircraft on their territories (Karrar 2009). In this sense, due to the spillover effect that the invasion of Afghanistan consequently caused, SCO members have defined as crucial the building of regional security through combating the ‘Three Evils’: terrorism, separatism and extremism.

In 2002 the Charter of the SCO was signed and, in 2004 and the organization Secretariat was created in Beijing. The Regional Counter-Terrorism Structure (RATS) was also created and based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Also in 2004, Mongolia became the first SCO observer-state, and in the following year, Iran, India and Pakistan did the same. It is important to remember that in 2002 the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was created, a military alliance based on mutual defense, which prohibits its members to take part in any other military alliance in its Charter, easing the arguments that SCO represents a military alliance. CSTO’s members are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan.

Since 2004 (until at least 2007), Haas (2007) considers the existence of a third phase of the SCO, which, according to him, has become a more comprehensive organization. Until then the SCO had focused its efforts preferentially on regional security problems, but since then it has moved on to encompass more issues in order to gain greater international recognition. Simultaneously, there has been an increase of the Chinese and Russian concerns over the growing influence of the U.S and Europe in the region, due to its military and energetic presence7 (Guimarães, et al 2010).

In 2005, a series of uprisings occurred in Central Asia (the so called Color Revolutions), which among others things, suffered accusations of being inflated by western countries, who wanted to keep their military bases operating in region. Accordingly, in the 2005 Astana Summit, the SCO approved a declaration calling on the U.S. to withdraw its troops from the region, as the countries in the region were capable of performing regional defense for themselves. The result was that the U.S. air base in Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan was closed and air traffic was banned for NATO aircraft on Uzbek territory. The Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan,

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7 Which are best represented by the construction of the pipeline Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline in 2002, draining resources from the Caspian (Kazakhstan) to Europe (Guimarães et al 2011).
however, was not closed, but there are expectations that it will be closed in 2014 (Guimarães, et al. 2010).

2. Statement of the issue

2.1. Afghanistan Today

The declared United States policy is to enable the Afghan government to defend itself against insurgency and to govern the country effectively, this way preventing the country from again becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups. It means enhancing central government capacity and strengthening the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). This does not require elimination of insurgency, just its reduction and weakening to the point they do not pose a threat to the existence of the Afghan government and can be engaged in a reconciliation process. In spite of the advances in both areas, local governance and security problems are still issues of great concern (IISS 2013, 7; Katzman 2013, 12).

Since January 11, 2013, ISAF’s security mission was to change its role of leading combat force to a support force. Such transition was completed on June 18, 2013, when the remaining 95 districts under coalition command were transferred to ANSF command. It does not mean that ISAF troops are leaving the country, but its role is more of mentoring and training Afghan soldiers, engaging in combat only in most difficult missions (Foreign Policy 2013a; BBC 2013). Despite this transition, there are still approximately 100,000 coalition troops in the country (68,000 from the United States and 28,000 from its allies), which are going to remain there until the end of 2014. Although it is still uncertain the size of the residual force to remain after 2014, a complete pullout of coalition forces is unlikely to happen (Katzman 2013).

The Afghan National Army (ANA), built since 2002, is now leading about 80-90% of all combat operations, some of them without participation of the coalition, but it still depends from coalition air support. Despite such advances, ANSF’s capacity of maintaining the country’s stability is largely questioned. A significant fact is that many attacks from ISAF troops come from Taliban infiltrated in ANSF (such acts became known as green-on-blue attacks). The result of such tactic is that the army and the police forces became unreliable and distrusted by its allies, apart from providing insurgent access to army tactics and classified information (IISS 2013, 10; Stratfor 2013).

The areas with less progress in fighting militant groups are the eastern and southeastern provinces. This region borders North Waziristan, a Pakistan province which is the heartland to insurgent groups as the Haqqani Network. Such region is likely to remain under insurgent control, what enables it to organize terrorist attacks on Kabul and other regions. Such actions are politically capitalized in order to demonstrate the state’s instability and incapacity to secure its citizens (IISS 2013, 10-11). In this sense, Pakistani area border serves as a “safe haven” for militant and
insurgent groups and its government is believed to provide support or at least to allow some groups in its territory, which act as their proxies in Afghanistan (IISS 2013). Despite the fact that Pakistan was an ally to the United States in its invasion of Afghanistan, providing transit and logistical routes in its territory, US-Pakistan relations deteriorated recently. After the killing of Osama bin Laden in its territory (without Pakistan’s government authorization) and the “accidental” killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers by U.S. forces. In the occasion, Pakistan closed NATO supply lines, but they were later resumed (Katzman 2013).

2.2. Local factions and insurgent organizations

Afghanistan’s population is divided in many tribal groups, formed by the historical processes of conquest and migration. Since the geographical disposition of such groups is older than the national border limits of the region’s countries, many countries in the region make use of its influence over determined internal groups or elites to influence Afghanistan’s internal affairs.

The Pashtuns, the largest group in Afghanistan, composing 40% of the population, are mainly Sunni Muslims. Pakistan has a strong influence over this population, due to the fact that many Pakistanis are pashtuns (Dini 2013, 101).
There are basically two different pashtun tribes: the Ghilzai and the Durrani. While the first ones compose most of Taliban senior members and are predominant in eastern Afghanistan, the later predominate in south and are traditional rivals of the Ghilzai (Katzman 2013, 5).

There are three other main groups. The **Hazaras** are Shiite, have strong ties with Iran, are traditional rivals of the Pashtun and were persecuted by the Taliban when it was in power. The **Tajiks** used to compose the core of state bureaucracy and were considered the elite of the country. Opposing to Pakistan, they are closely related to Russia, Tajikistan, India and even Iran. The **Uzbeks**, of Turkish ancestry, are more related to Turkmenistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan influence (Dini 2013).

Afghan central government is still challenged by many armed groups, “loosely allied with each other” (Katzman 2013, 13). An important fact is that these groups are financed mainly with donations from individuals from the Arab Gulf and revenues from poppy cultivation and trafficking (Katzman 2013). Some of the most preeminent are:

- **Afghan Taliban/Qetta Shura Taliba (QST)**: It still remains as the core of the insurgency, and is the major faction to oppose the government. Its leader (at least nominally) Mullah Muhammad Umar, and some of its top subordinates are believed to operate from Pakistan, most probably in the city of Quetta. The older members, which include Mullah Umar, are known to be more pragmatic and open to peace talks and political settlement. In October 24, 2012, he even stated that Taliban does not seek regaining power. However, such pragmatists face opposition from younger and hard-line leaders, which believe in a Taliban victory after 2014 (Katzman 2013; Bajoria and Laub 2013);

- **Haqqani Network**: seen by U.S. officials as the most dangerous threat to Afghan security and stability, this faction was founded by Jalalaludin Haqqani, a former mujahedeen and former Taliban. It is supposed to have ties to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), and it is a fact that it is protected or even tolerated in North Waziristan. Another evidence of such proximity is its focus on targeting Indian interests in Afghanistan (Katzman 2013; IISS 2013);

- **Hikmatyar Faction (HIG)**: a smaller faction in Afghanistan. Although ideologically aligned with the Talibna, the two groups have occasionally clashed in territorial disputes. It is quite open to a reconciliation with Kabul and had held talks with the Afghan government (Katzman 2013);

- **Pakistani Taliban/Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TPP)**: Fights primarily the government of Pakistan, but also supports the Afghan Taliban. Some of its men operate hidden in Afghanistan. There are also another Pakistani minor groups operating in Afghanistan, as Laskhar-e-Tayyiba (LET) which used to oppose Indian control of Kashmir and Lashkar-i-Janghi, accused of conducting attacks on Afghanistan's Hazara community (Katzman 2013);
The United States and Afghanistan are now in search of a settlement with the Taliban and other major groups, in order to end the conflict. The ethnic groups in north have opposed to this, alleging that if a political settlement is reached with the Taliban, which would involve the concession of territory or ministerial posts, its freedom may be at risk (Katzman 2013, 41). After the government started discussing a peace deal, warlords from the north started rearming its factions (The Telegraph 2010). To counter such concerns, Hamid Karzai established an “Afghan High Peace Council” to oversee the process, allocating former members of the Northern Alliance in it. Since then, many informal meetings between the government and the Taliban have occurred (Katzman 2013, 41).

2.3. Fighting Terrorism

According to Neves Junior and Piccolli (2012), two different approaches to the problem of terrorism in Asia became flagrant after the invasion of Afghanistan and the declaration of the “War on Terror”: (i) the interventionist approach, practiced by the United States; and (ii) the regional institutionalization of the fight against terrorism, put into action by China and Russia, with some influence from India. The first strategy focuses on preemptive attacks focused on eliminating radical Islamic groups and in destabilizing selected governments supposed to support them. The second approach emphasizes the role of the State in fighting terrorist and insurgent menaces. It is based on a more broad conception of radical Islamism and in the principle of non-intervention in internal issues and acts in the sense of rebuilding or strengthening of national states in South Asia (Neves Junior & Piccolli 2012). Its most practical result was the creation of SCO itself, as seen above.

The interventionist approach is defined by the United States wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, during George W. Bush’s mandate. Until now, some of its results are quite clear: the Taliban government was overthrown, Osama bin Laden was killed, Al-Qaeda was progressively weakened and its presence in Afghanistan is almost vanished. Although these facts suggest a victory against terrorism in the United States public opinion, reality is not that simple (Neves Junior & Piccolli 2012). As shown above, irregular warfare and terrorist attacks have persisted for more than ten years. Despite being overthrown, Taliban remains the main insurgent force. Now, it is being called to peace talks and it is possibly going to compose the government (Foreign Police 2013). In addition, the resistance by other factions, such as the former members of the Northern Alliance, to the inclusion of Taliban (Bajoria and Laub 2013) shows that a peace settlement, even if successful, may not be endurable or stable.

Initially, SCO member states saw the American invasion with good eyes. Though the “war on terror” only became pivotal to the security agenda of the western powers after the 09/11, it was already a reality to many states in Asia since the end of the Cold War. Russia faced terrorist tactics from separatist groups in North
Caucasus, especially from Chechnya, and China dealt with separatist groups from Tibet and Xinjiang. Although not leading the regional institutionalization, India and Central Asia states had already years of experience in fighting terror, which were of great validity in this process. India and Kashmir were home of numerous terrorist groups (Neves Junior & Piccoli 2012) and Central Asian states had groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan challenging its laic governments (Khanna 2008; Khan 2006).

Afghanistan, during Taliban rule, has always served as a safe haven for such groups, and its neighboring countries had no effective means to change this situation. An international coalition to defeat Taliban was, therefore, was accounted as a good thing (Safranchuk 2013).

The new perspective to the fight against terrorism, now posed as a “crusade” and common international goal, gave Russia and China legitimacy to project its internal projects to a regional scope. In this sense, the idea of war on terror was capitalized to enhance its presence in Central Asia (militarily, in the case of Russia; diplomatically/economically, in case of China) and develop regional counterterrorism mechanisms. As Neves Junior and Piccoli put it, “the process of profile transformation of the war against terrorism in the region (...) began in the same moment the policy of war on terror proposed by the United States was implemented. (...) However, the opportunity of imposing its specific characteristics to the war on terror in the region only became possible in recent times, with American occupation’s deterioration” (Neves Junior & Piccoli 2011, 112, our translation).

2.4. After war: the necessity of a regional approach

Afghanistan has a series of particularities that deeply connect its fate to Central and South Asia, such as the fact that its internal groups involved in terrorism have transnational connections to other groups around the region. In this sense, a regional approach to its internal problems seems to be most appropriate way to deal with them. Even the war logistics itself required some level of cooperation with its bordering countries, since the country is deep into continent, with no access to the seas. It means that the flow of supplies, troops and ammunition cannot be delivered by the U.S. Navy by itself, and must be transported by land, through the territory of its neighbors (Safranchuk 2013). During operation Enduring Freedom, many countries in the region offered military bases and help to the invasion, in exchange of the legitimating of its own regional efforts and counterterrorist policies (Neves Junior & Piccoli 2011, 112).

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8 The Caucasus region, situated between the Black and Caspian seas, is divided between its northern and southern shares: South Caucasus is composed by independent states, such as Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia; North Caucasus is composed of federative units of the Russian Federation, such as the Dagestan Republic, Chechnya and North Ossetia. Its populations are mainly Islamic and the porosity between the two Caucasus fractions makes any incident in one side of the border to affect the other (Neves Junior & Piccoli 2011).
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit

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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Facility</th>
<th>Use</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Incirlik Air Base</td>
<td>From there, U.S. aircraft supply troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hosts around 2,100 U.S. troops.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>Peter Ganci Base</td>
<td>Refuels and cargo aircraft for supplying U.S. forces in Afghanistan. The Kyrgyz parliament voted for not extending the U.S. lease beyond the end of 2014.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>Air bases and railroads</td>
<td>Air bases are used by coalition partners, especially France. India also uses the base. The new Northern Route make use of Tajikistan territory and railroads.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>Navoi Airfield and railroads</td>
<td>The air base is not used since 2009, after the U.S. dispute over crackdowns in Andijon. Now its railroads are used to transport nonlethal supplies to Afghanistan after coming from Russia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Railroads</td>
<td>Allows only the transit of nonlethal equipment through its railroads.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>Overland routes and Karachi docks</td>
<td>It used to be the main transit route to Afghanistan, but now the Northern Distribution Network is being preferred to it. Heavy equipment comes from the Karachi docks and goes until the Khyber Pass.</td>
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Nowadays, the major transit corridor for supplying troops in Afghanistan is the Northern Distribution Network, which goes through Russia and several Central Asian republics. Such example of regional cooperation is fruit of a 2009 agreement between the American and Russian governments, allowing the U.S. to transport troops and equipment. Such northern corridor is expected to be the main pathway to remove ISAF troops from the country, in a process that can take as long as three or four years. The fact is that the United States are trying to diversify their transit areas in order not to depend too much on any specific country. Alternative projects may encompass Pakistan, Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan (Nessar 2011).

In spite of all initial enthusiasm with the perspectives of enhancing its project of national security and expanding it to a regional level, the actual results of the war are still uncertain. The fact is that Afghanistan is not yet politically stabilized, faces many insurgency threats and lacks security forces strong enough to maintain internal order. There is fear that the country may fall in the same situation as after the Soviets left the country (Kumar 2013). The major concern is the spillover effect that an unstable Afghanistan may have in the entire region, in what concerns drug trafficking and insurgency. It could become once more a sanctuary for extremists.

Therefore, Afghanistan's central government collapse - caused by a fast departure of U.S. troops - is considered a worst case scenario by SCO members. However, the announcement of maintenance of US military bases in Afghanistan territory after 2014 by the Afghan president Hamid Karzai was not happily received by some countries (RIA Novosti 2012). On the one hand, a fast withdrawal after the wreckage of the country’s infrastructure and institutions is not desired by anyone, but, on the other hand, China and Russia do not approve the idea of maintaining U.S. bases in Afghan territory (Nessar 2011).

The United States have recently realized the necessity of a regional approach and are beginning to support it, in convergence with the region’s interests. It happened mostly for two reasons: (i) the unsuccessful strategy of trying to completely eliminate insurgent groups, and (ii) the economic crisis constraining the country’s defense budget. In this sense, it has launched a new strategy to guarantee stability and their influence in the post-2014 Afghanistan: the Modern Silk Road Strategy. It devises a way to keep Afghanistan as a hub for transportation of energy, raw materials and goods, connecting East Asia to Europe and Middle East. Such strategy aims
to build modern roads, railways and energy pipelines across Afghanistan and its
neighbors. The central idea is that economic opportunities and development can
stabilize Afghanistan (Starr & Kuchins 2010; Hormats 2011; Lin 2011, 02).

Such strategy requires a regional effort, since it would require some level of
infrastructure integration with Central and South Asia, hooking many other
parties to the project. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are involved in enterprises to
deliver electricity to Afghanistan. Turkmenistan and Pakistan are supposed to be
part of TAPI, a gas pipeline that is planned to pump Turkmen gas to India and
Pakistan through Afghan territory (Goncharov 2012, 21).

SCO members see with good eyes the idea of stabilizing the region through
investments in infrastructure, but its goals differ substantially to U.S. Despite
the apparent converge of interests between American and SCO states’ interests,
there are countries inside the organization that are contrary to the maintenance of
United States influence in the region. China, for example has invested in energy
and mineral sources in Afghanistan, and its pursuing its own New Silk Road
Strategy (Lin 2011, 03-06; Krugman 2013), but it necessarily requires a stable and
pacified Afghanistan and Central Asia. Otherwise, its pipelines could be subject of
attacks by insurgent groups (Dini 2013, 133).

2.5. The SCO faces new regional challenges

SCO member states have already recognized the need of a regional framework
to deal with the Afghan problem and have a great interest in seeing it pacific
and stable (Katzman 2013). The fear of an unstable Afghanistan was behind the
creation of the SCO itself, as Vorobiev puts it,

One should not forget that the SCO emerged as a response to immediate threats
of terrorism and drug trafficking, which came from Afghanistan in the late 1990s.
The SCO idea was born from a collective demand for a regional coalition to
combat them (Vorobiev 2012a).

Afghanistan’s situation poses to SCO the opportunity of moving to a next
level and putting the Afghan issue on its scope area. But also poses the challenge
of facing the organization’s main problems. Twelve years after its creation, the
institution has proved itself capable of resisting time, showing it was not only
a situational organization. It has also been recognized as the most important
international organization in the region, and as a relevant part of the global
political context. Despite such accomplishments, the organization still faces many
problems and challenges to reach a next level of performance. In order to fulfill it,
the SCO members still have to answer some conceptual questions about what the
organization is and what it intends to be (Vorobiev 2012a, Yu 2011).

In this sense, the accession of new members is a major issue in SCO’s response
to the Afghan challenge. As seen above, some countries in the region have strong
influence in Afghanistan stabilization. This way, incorporating such States into
SCO would enhance the organization’s capability to coordinate actions in a more effective way. However, despite adding new observer members and dialogue partners, the SCO core remains unchanged. The accession of new members is a particularly controversial matter in the organization, since any enlargement is subject of conflicting interests among its current members, especially between Russia and China. There is fear that adding to many members would loosen the organization ties and its capacity to act promptly (Vorobiev 2012; Yu 2011). India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan and Mongolia are considered the most probable accession candidates.

India, Iran and Pakistan are seen as having a great importance in future Afghanistan mediations, due to their bonds with Afghan elites (Dini 2013). Despite that, the above mentioned obstacles have, until now, frozen the accession processes.

India has asked to join the organization, and its accession is strongly supported by Russia, in order to counterbalance Chinese influence inside the organization. India’s accession would be of great impact since it would place three of the main powers in Asia inside the SCO. But accepting India would require the entry of Pakistan as well, in order to avoid Islamabad’s diplomatic boycott towards the organization (Lukyanov 2010; Yu 2011).

Accepting India and Pakistan in the organization would significantly enlarge the SCO’s scope, both in geographic and thematic terms, since it would probably have to encompass the Kashmir issue. Since Central Asia already has several problems to solve, many members do not consider such agenda expansion a good move. As SCO Heads of State have not achieved a consensus in such question, a precondition has been established for the two countries: they should solve their territorial disputes first (Yu 2011).

Iran was the first State to apply for membership. Its inclusion is seen by many as constructive in helping to address the Afghan problem, due its ties with the Hazara Shiite community (Syroezkhin 2012, 20; Dini 2013). However, Iran's problems with the United States over its nuclear program would add an item which is far from desirable to the SCO’s agenda, and it could be viewed as a move against the West. That is the reason why in the 2010 Astana Summit, SCO members stated that any country subject to international sanctions cannot become an SCO member (Lukyanov 2010, Yu 2011).

Turkey has already demonstrated interest in becoming an SCO member, what, added to its crescent disinterest in becoming a European Union member, is seen by some as a move towards the East. In fact, it has already become a SCO dialogue partner. Turkey has already hosted important fora regarding Afghanistan, namely the Istanbul Processes. Its accession would have significant effects, due to the fact that it is a NATO member, and its entry could be a step towards more cooperation

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9 India and Pakistan dispute the border region of Kashmir since the 1950s, when Pakistan split from India, becoming independent. Numerous wars were fought to determine the possession of it.
between the two organizations, something seen as necessary in the pacification of Afghanistan. Adding Afghanistan itself is considered a wise, although audacious, move. In this sense, the SCO and the RATS structure could serve to fight internal insurgency (Goncharov 2012, 22).

3. Previous international actions

The first international initiatives regarding Afghanistan’s stabilization were coordinated by the United States and its allies, and dealt mainly with state-building efforts. The first Bonn Conference, held in December 2001, assembled countries and the major non-Taliban Afghan factions and established the reconstitution of the government, a Constitution, and its main political institutions (Napoleão 2012, 08-09). The United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) was established alongside, mainly to help in governance and reconciliation issues. Later conferences in London (2006) and Paris (2008) sought to coordinate efforts in drugs eradication, poverty reduction and human rights. Despite the focus on state-building, such measures’ results were the Afghanistan government’s increasing reliance on international aid (Katzman 2013, 12; Napoleão 2012, 08-09).

Barack Obama’s first mandate inaugurated a new phase, characterized by a determined focus on counterinsurgency efforts anchored in an “afghanization” of the conflict and a simultaneous promotion of regional cooperation. At the same time, its neighboring countries began mobilizing regional diplomacy mechanisms. In 2010, the complete removal of troops was scheduled to 2014 in the NATO Lisbon Summit. In 2011, the “New Silk Road” was launched (Katzman 2013, 44; Napoleão 2012, 11-12).

In the same year, the Istanbul Process, hosted by Turkey, joined the main countries involved in reconstruction and integration efforts. It can be seen as a milestone in the process of stabilizing Afghanistan. Its product, the Istanbul Declaration, established the principles for a regional and multilateral approach to stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. It states that “Afghanistan’s role as the land bridge in the ‘Heart of Asia’, connecting South Asia, Central Asia, Eurasia and the Middle East” and its signatories “(…) welcome Afghanistan’s willingness and determination to use its regional and historical position to do its part to promote security and peaceful cooperation in the region” (Turkey 2011).

Afghanistan joined the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2004 and became an SCO observer member in 2012. The issue also gave birth to new mechanisms, besides entering in the agenda of existing institutions. Regional meetings have proliferated, such as the “Regional Working Group” co-chaired by Turkey and UNAMA (which organized the Istanbul Process in 2011 and created the Kabul Silk Road initiative), and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA), which held its first meeting in 2012 (Katzman 2013, 44).
The Quadrilateral Summit (also known as the Dushanbe Four) encompassing Russia, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, was formed in 2009, originally aiming to promote regional energy cooperation. Its official objective is to help the building of the electric transmission line CASA 1000, which would supply Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, but the forum has broadened its scope in order to encompass issues related to coordinating national efforts on combating drug trafficking and terrorism (Martins et al. 2011; Goncharov 2009). It is also a Tajik attempt to counter Iranian influence in Afghanistan through the promotion of similar initiatives, namely two trilateral summits: with Afghanistan and Tajikistan in 2007 and with Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2009 (Goncharov 2009).

Afghanistan became a central concern in SCO’s agenda in 2005, when the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was established (SCO 2009). The group became the main channel of dialogue and cooperation between SCO and Afghanistan in the following years. The main issues of concern were how to avoid spillover effects in terrorism and drug trafficking and the top priorities pointed in order to solve these issues were the strengthening of Afghanistan’s state capabilities and the enhancement of cooperation with the SCO, added to the delimitation of anti-narcotics security belts around Afghanistan (SCO 2007). The institution also developed dialogue initiatives with the European Union concerning Afghanistan (SCO 2008). In 2009, a special conference with the Afghan government and a Plan of Action on combating terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime was developed (SCO 2009; Anand 2012). During the Astana Summit, in 2011, the support for an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation process was declared, as well as the support for United Nations efforts in the country (Anand 2012). In the 2012 Beijing SCO Summit, Afghanistan was accepted as an observer SCO member (Xinhuanet 2012a).

Afghanistan’s stabilization has been widely recognized as an issue to be discussed in a regional and multilateral framework. Numerous fora and ad hoc groups have been established to discuss it, but little has been effectively done in terms of coordination of policies and full accession of Afghanistan to regional cooperation mechanisms. As put by Anand,

Finding a regional solution to Afghan imbroglio was one of the important pillars of Obama’s strategy of 2009. Yet, nothing substantial has been done by the U.S. to move towards that goal. Whether it is the Istanbul process, Bonn Conference or the SCO’s summits many declarations have been made yet implementation of the same has not come about (Anand 2012).

4. Bloc positions

Afghanistan strives to survive as a political entity, aiming to bargain in order to extract the most benefits it can from its neighbors and other external players in its internal issues. It became an SCO observer-member in 2012, and intends to soon
ascend to the status of full member. Regional cooperation in fight against terrorism is essential for the country. In this sense, the country has several partnerships with its neighbors, such as Iran, Tajikistan and Pakistan, who seek to control the flow of arms, drugs and people across their borders. Afghan-Pakistani relations, however, are unstable since it is known that many extremists find safe haven in Pakistan. On the one hand, Afghanistan's central government's relation with Taliban is another subject that concerns the entire region: Taliban's high command has declared it does not consider the elections to be held in 2014 legitimate. On the other hand, the current Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, has already indicated his candidate, Abdul Rab Rassul Sayyaf, a Pashtun powerful ex-jihadi leader, which may be a conciliatory factor between the parties (Foreign Policy 2013b).

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is probably the most crucial single country to Afghanistan's future. Despite being accused of supporting terrorist groups such as the Taliban and Haqqani network, Islamabad claims to be highly committed to the cause of fighting terrorism, and has arrested hundreds of people involved with Al-Qaeda, Taliban and other groups since the beginning of hostilities, including senior members of these organizations. Nonetheless, its focus is mainly on efforts against the Pakistani Taliban (Katzman 2013, 47-48). In addition, the country actively engages in Afghan rebuilding, mainly through joint infrastructure projects with Iran. Afghanistan's situation is essential to the future of Pakistan and its rivalry with India: the worst scenario for Pakistanis would be if Afghanistan allied with India. Pakistan even accuses India to recruit anti-Pakistan insurgents in Afghanistan through its consulates, undermining Pakistani influence in the country. In this sense, Pakistan aims to guarantee a strategic depth into Afghanistan, which would grant it maneuverability in an Indo-Pakistani confrontation, representing a crucial factor in the eventual conflict's outcome (Katzman 2013, 47). Pakistan also credits to the SCO the main role in Afghanistan's rebuilding and has demonstrated desire to become a full member of the organization, as it is currently an observer member (Dawn 2011).

Afghanistan's situation is also important to the interests of India, which participates effectively in the reconstruction of the country, being the fifth largest donor to the cause: schools, roads and hydroelectric plants are among major Indian works in the country. Recently, it has signed a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan (Katzman 2013, 52). In this sense, India believes that its role in Afghanistan can be a great asset to achieve the desired full member status in SCO, which, according to India, would be the best platform for the countries of the region to work together in the Afghan case (The Hindu 2012). Moreover, India supports Karzai's government in the fight against insurgent groups like the Taliban and the Haqqani network, which has, according to the Indian government, links with Pakistan and is the author of several attacks to Indian representations in Afghanistan (Ivanov 2012). Indo-Pakistani competition is quite ferocious inside
Afghanistan, where contests for influence involve the establishment of consulates, infrastructure buildings and political support for different groups (Katzman 2013).

Iran has two main goals in the Afghan situation: to avoid the establishment of U.S. military bases in the country after 2012 and to expand its historical influence over western Afghanistan. It seeks to achieve the later by supporting the Hazara Shiite community and other Persian-speaking minorities, through the building of technical institutes and mosques (Katzman 2013, 49-50). In spite of these facts, and the traditional Iranian hostility towards Taliban (which was seen as a threat to Teheran's interests in Afghanistan when it was in power), recent ISAF reports state that Iran funds, trains and arms the group (Katzman 2013, 50).

Iran has a background of cooperation and efforts to stabilize and rebuild the country, having occupied a central role in building the first Afghan government after the Taliban in 2002 (in the Bonn Conference). In what concerns development aid, the country plans to deliver US$ 1 billion to Afghanistan until 2020, US$ 500 million of which have already been provided until the moment. Iran also cooperates with region's countries to build infrastructure in Afghanistan, primarily with India and Pakistan. Diplomatically, Iran has important ties with India, and both seek to undermine Pakistani (and Pashtun) presence in Afghan territory. Furthermore, Iran historically disputes the leadership in region's relations with Tajikistan. Teheran has already held two summits – Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran-Afghanistan-Tajikistan, while the Dushanbe Four (Tajikistan-Pakistan-Afghanistan-Russia) is driven by Tajikistan (Goncharov 2009). Currently an SCO observer-member, Iran has been seeking full-member status for several years, however, the Organization insists on not accepting countries under UN sanctions (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty 2012), although the historic Persian influence in Afghanistan makes it a major player in the debate.

The People’s Republic of China has particular interests and economic resources that make it a major player in the Afghan issue. It supported the United States intervention in Afghanistan and United Nations efforts of nation building by training Afghan military officers in China and sending police officers to UNAMA. However, once NATO has assumed the leadership of ISAF, China decided not to provide military aid and does not even allow the transit of non-lethal supplies to Afghanistan (Dini 2013). Its major participation is in economic terms: Chinese state-owned firms have invested in oil fields in Amu Darya and in a copper mine in Mes Aynak, which has been attacked 19 times by militants in 2012 (Pantucci 2013a; Petersen 2013). The political involvement is also growing, since China and Afghanistan have announced intentions to sign a strategic partnership agreement (Xinhuanet 2012b).

China’s bordering region with Afghanistan is the Autonomous Province of Xinjiang, which homes separatist groups of the Uighur ethnic minority. Fearing
spillover effects, China has closed its 76km border with Afghanistan. However, the flow of militants among the two countries has apparently continued, since the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the major terrorist group in China, is reported to have some of its militants fighting in Afghanistan and Waziristan and to have contacts to Taliban and Al-Qaeda (Dini 2013; Pantucci 2013b). In order to counter such threats, the Chinese government has launched a strategy to develop Xinjiang, turning it in part of its own Silk Road Strategy (China 2012).

The porosity of the Afghan border also worries Russia. One of the founding members of the SCO, the country is a major ISAF logistics supplier in Afghanistan, and has large investments in the country, particularly in electricity (the sums exceed the mark of $ 1 billion). However, Western presence in the region also concerns the Russians, who have demonstrated the possibility of moving a larger amount of troops to the Afghan-Tajik border when ISAF withdraws from the country (Katzman 2013, 53). Terrorists’ flow from Afghanistan to Chechnya (historically separatist region of Russia) is another growing concern of the Russian government, which coordinates cooperation with Central Asian countries through the RATS structure (Bowen 2013).

Connections between Al-Qaeda and Chechen groups date back to the 1990s, on Chechnya’s first secessionist war against Russia, when Afghanistan was a training site for rebels (Chossudovsky 2013). Russia’s leadership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), apart from its historical preeminence in former Soviet republics, provides it with considerable influence over Central Asian states. The CSTO serves not only to train armed forces officials of its members under a Russian doctrine, but also to sell modern equipments and armaments at low prices. Furthermore, the CSTO permanent bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan guarantee the Russian-led military integration (Frost 2009, 84-86).

Besides the flow of terrorists across Afghanistan’s north border, the flow of drugs is a major concern of countries in the region, especially Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, in addition to Russia, which have become important warehouses for trafficking. About 90 tons of heroin (valued at $ 18 billion, almost the sum of both GDP) passes by these countries each year, bound mainly to Europe and Russia. Kyrgyzstan has already expressed concern about the power vacuum that will emerge in the region after ISAF’s withdrawal, but reiterated that Russia and the SCO are the most important partners in containing threats that exist and will arise. Holding a similar vision, Tajikistan is home of Russia’s 201st Motor Rifle Division, which operates in partnership with Tajik security forces in its southwesterly border (Bowen 2013). Both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have key role in the logistics of any operation that takes place in Afghanistan, because they are essential parts of the Northern Route, as previously mentioned (New York Times 2011).

Uzbekistan usually keeps itself relatively distant from SCO’s most important events, such as the joint military exercises (Eurasianet 2011). In the last one (Tajikistan 2012), additionally from being the only member not to participate, it
prohibited the passage of Kazakh forces through its territory, which had to pass through Kyrgyzstan instead (Eurasianet 2012). However, Uzbekistan is essential in regional stability for several reasons: it is the most populous country and the only one to have direct borders with all Central Asian countries plus Afghanistan. Besides, it houses the Ferghana Valley, bordering Tajikistan, which is the most unstable spot of Central Asia, a focus of poverty, terrorists training and drug trafficking that radiates to all other countries. Besides, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has training sites and represents the main threat in North Afghanistan, where the ethnic majority is Uzbek (Al Jazeera 2013). However, Uzbekistan is an important logistical alternative to the unstable Pakistan (which represents a considerable bargaining element) and could occupy an essential role in the rebuilding process (Chayes 2012).

Uzbekistan’s traditional rivalry with Kazakhstan provides another challenge for the SCO in dealing with the Afghan issue. The later has the largest territory and the largest economy in Central Asia, driven mainly by its huge fossil reserves. In this sense, the country traditionally strives to be the regional leader, often acting within the institutional structure of SCO with proactive and occupying intermediary role between Russia and China with the other countries (Weitz 2008, 34-35). Illegal drugs flows from Afghanistan are treated as both a foreign and a national security issue by Kazakhstan. The country accordingly considers the building of a solid regional infrastructure (roads, rail and pipelines) that includes Afghanistan, essential to Central Asia’s stabilization and to that country’s prosperity (Weitz 2008, 150).

Although it is a NATO member, Turkey claims for a full member status in the SCO. The country has a central role in Afghanistan’s rebuilding, since it is the commander of ISAF in Kabul district, the Afghan capital (Katzman, 2013). Turkish forces do not participate in combat in Afghanistan, but they do in training and patrols, emphasizing the role of supporter of Afghan reconstruction (Sunday’s Zaman 2012). In this sense, Ankara seems able to occupy a central role in Afghanistan in the future, due to its diplomatic capacity and relative willingness to do so. Turkey has historical bonds with Central Asia, and its leadership in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) turn it into a preeminent regional player. Turkey has good relations with all countries of the region, particularly with Pakistan and Afghanistan, with important diplomatic role in times of crisis.

Traditionally a Russian ally, Belarus is one of SCO’s dialogue partners. It is also a CSTO member and actively cooperates with the SCO within the framework of its forums, including in the RATS. Sri Lanka has good relations with its neighbors mainly with China, Pakistan and Russia; the country can be useful in the Organisation, since it has been effective in fighting against internal extremists, like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and also is a country in a rebuilding process (Sri Lanka Civil War ended in 2009) (Asian Tribune 2010). In turn, Mongolia has observer status in the SCO member-since 2004, being an important
partner of the Organisation (Jargalsaiikhan 2012). The country emphasizes SCO’s centrality to security issues in the region, especially in the fight against drug trafficking, a regional calamity (Info Mongolia 2012).

5. Questions to ponder

1. What concrete measures should the Shanghai Cooperation Organization take in the process of stabilizing Afghanistan?
2. How is it possible to conciliate the diverse goals and interests of the major regional players in Afghanistan?
3. How should the SCO interact with the United States and NATO in what regards the Afghan situation?
4. Is it possible for the SCO to assume leadership in the process of integrating Afghanistan to regional institutions? How should it relate to other organizations such as SAARC, ECO and CSTO?
5. Is full-membership in the SCO for other regional players necessary in order to achieve Afghanistan’s stabilization? How can the different interests of such countries be conciliated in order to assure their support to the SCO?

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At the 2011 SCO Summit in Astana the need for a phase transition was admitted, and the implementation of a strategy for the next years was encouraged. In this regard, Afghanistan’s question is a key point to be debated. The country has observer-state status in the organization and its stabilization matters for future relations in the bloc, since the country represents a serious focus of terrorism and both guns and drugs traffic. In fact, the spill-over effects of its non-stabilization can negatively affect practically all SCO member states. There are concerns on what will happen when the United States completely withdraw their forces from the country. Some projects for the region’s stabilization are already being planned, as, for example, transforming Afghanistan in a hub for pipelines and trade lines, which materializes in a United States version of the New Silk Road. This creates the possibility of increasing dialogue between SCO and the United States. The expansion of the SCO core, by adding members, is also a particularly controversial matter, and it is directly related to Afghanistan’s stabilization.