



*The great game of Central Asia reincarnates at the beginning of the 21st Century*



# THE GREAT GAME OF CENTRAL ASIA REINCARNATES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY



El gran juego de Asia central se reencarna a comienzos del siglo XXI

O Grande Jogo de Ásia Central reencarna-se a começos do século XXI

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Great Game is the term that describes the confrontation between the British and the Russian Empires centered around the control of Central Asia during the 19th Century. This conflict ended when both empires showed a gradual decline. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, the United States invasion of Afghanistan re-opened the Great Game. The United States, Russia, China and other world powers take part in this confrontation to control Central Asia and its important resources.

**Keywords:** Great Game, Globalization, United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan.

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## **RESUMEN**

El Gran Juego es como se denominó la disputa que desarrollaron los imperios británico y ruso por el control de Asia Central en el siglo XIX. Este conflicto se extinguió con el declive de ambos imperios. Sin embargo, a comienzos del siglo XXI, la invasión de Afganistán por parte de los Estados Unidos ha reabierto la partida del Gran Juego. Los Estados Unidos, Rusia, China y otras potencias intervienen ahora en esta disputa por controlar la región de Asia Central y sus importantes recursos.

**Palabras clave:** Gran Juego, globalización, Estados Unidos, Afganistán, Pakistán.

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## **RESUMO**

O Grande Jogo é como se denominou a disputa que desenvolveram os impérios britânicos e russo pelo controle da Ásia Central no século XIX. Este conflito se extinguiu com o declive de ambos os impérios. Porém, a começos do século XXI, a invasão do Afeganistão da parte dos Estados Unidos tem reaberto a partida do Grande Jogo. Os Estados Unidos, a Rússia, a China e outras potências intervêm agora em esta disputa por controlar a região da Ásia Central e os seus importantes recursos.

**Palavras chave:** Grande Jogo, Globalização, Estados Unidos, Afeganistão, Paquistão.

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## INTRODUCTION

After 9/11, the image of the United States had deteriorated abroad. The world was shown a vulnerability image of the global system leading super power. In the country, the public opinion expected a strong response to these attacks that could not go unpunished. G.W. Bush's government decided that the best option was an armed intervention that would quickly restore the world's trust in the United States' ability to maintain order and give satisfaction to the humiliated national pride (Chomsky, 2002). In a short period of time, it was decided to attack Afghanistan's Taliban regime <sup>1</sup>. Its military weakness offered an easy target for a quick victory at a low cost (Jan, 2006).

The Taliban had maintained good relations with Al Qaeda <sup>2</sup> and were highly unpopular among the Western public opinion, who deplored their fundamentalist Islamic regime. The links between Al Qaeda and the Taliban dated back to the Afghanistan War (1979-1989) (Kaplan, 2002), when they fought against the Soviets with help of the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (Cooley, 2002). After the Soviet withdrawal from the country and the Afghan Communist Government collapse in 1992 (Rubin, 2002), the two large mujahideen forces <sup>3</sup> competed for power, the Northern Alliance and the Hekmatyar, an

alliance of southern tribes. In January 1993, the conflict resulted in an open civil war, which lasted officially until 1998 and ended up with the Taliban's occupation of most of the territory. <sup>4</sup>

The Taliban had prospered during the conflict and had earned the respect of its allies as fierce shock troops. In addition, they received almost all the international support from Pakistan, the Persian Gulf monarchies and the global Jihad Groups, such as Al Qaeda (Rashid, 2009). Once in Government, the Taliban imposed the *Sharia*. <sup>5</sup> Their regime was despotic and carried out ethnic cleansing against the hazaras <sup>6</sup> and repression against homosexuals and political dissidents, deprived girls from public education and created some religious police in charge of prosecuting and punishing transgressions of good traditional manners (Porter, 2009).

Besides brutality and repression, their Government did not help to repair the enormous human disaster inherited from the war, <sup>7</sup> as the economic situation was disastrous. Taking advantage of internal discontent and rising international pressure against the regime at the beginning of the new century, Russia, Iran and India decided to secretly support the Northern Alliance to overthrow the Taliban. On the other hand, The United States maintained an ambiguous attitude towards the Taliban until 9/11, as US oil corporations held negotiations with the Taliban to build an oil pipeline in Afghanistan. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Taliban are an Afghan Muslim fundamentalist group connected with the Muslim Brothers, the Saudi Wahhabism and the Kashmir Islamists (Griffin, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Mullah Omar, the Taliban's leader, had invited Bin Laden to live in Afghanistan in 1996. Two years later, in 1998, Al Qaeda's attacks on US targets began (Rashid, 2009, p.20).

<sup>3</sup> Mujahideen are those warriors fighting for Islam.

<sup>4</sup> However, the combats between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance continued after that date (Rashid, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Islamic religious law.

<sup>6</sup> The Hazaras are an ethnic group who preaches on the Shia mindset of Islam. They live south with the Pashtuns and north with the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen. Together they make up the main ethnic groups in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2009, p.9).

<sup>7</sup> In the summer of 2001, there were 3.6 million Afghan refugees in neighboring countries. They represented the largest refugee population in the world, besides from another 800,000-displaced people in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2009, p.25).

<sup>8</sup> Until a few days before 9/11, the oil company Unocal had held negotiations with the Taliban to build a pipeline through Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (Rashid, 2009).

The 9/11 attacks changed Washington policy, which decided to invade Afghanistan and overthrow the Taliban. For this attack, the United States was backed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (UN), who considered proven the Al Qaeda's ties to the Taliban, therefore an action of self-defense by the United States against Afghanistan was justified.<sup>9</sup> The UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution obliging all States to fight against terrorism and its financial networks. On the other hand, NATO invoked Article 5 of its statutes and declared that the 9/11 attacks were a direct attack on all States of the alliance.

However, Washington surprised the international community by resorting to a unilateral management of the crisis and ignoring the multilateral terms that had previously been applied in the Gulf War in 1991. On September 15, President Bush gave an ultimatum to the Taliban. They either turned in Bin Laden and shut down all Al Qaeda training camps or they would have to face the consequences. On September 18, the Afghan government declared that they would extradite Bin Laden if the United States provided solid evidence of his involvement with the 9/11 attacks. The United States did not respond. The Pakistani government offered to mediate and proposed that Bin Laden was judged by a court in Pakistan. The Bush administration responded that its demands were clear and were not open to negotiations (Mann, 2004, pp. 145-146).

The operation Afghanistan Invasion, Enduring Freedom, was launched on October 7, 2001, with participation of the United States and the United Kingdom armies, supported by a small multinational force, the Northern Alliance and the Afghan opposition group to the Taliban (Batalla, 2006). The official objective of the Afghanistan invasion was to find Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden, while overthrowing the unpopular Taliban regime. Numerous surrounding States, such as Russia and Iran, offered their cooperation on infrastructure.<sup>10</sup>

After several days of bombing that disarticulated the Taliban's military forces, Northern Alliance troops were able to advance on Kabul. Finally, the capital was taken over on November 13, 2001. In addition, it was the cheapest war Washington had ever fought.<sup>11</sup> Virtually no US ground troops intervened. Only air forces and navy carried out bombardments. The rest was left in hands of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), who financed and armed opposition groups to the Taliban. In spite of the quick victory, Bin Laden was not captured and fled with numerous Taliban troops to Pakistan.<sup>12</sup>

### ***THE AFGHANISTAN OCCUPATION***

In the following weeks, on December 22, 2001, a new Government was appointed which was friendly to the United States and led by Hamid Karzai.<sup>13</sup> However, bringing peace to the country was much more complicated than the war itself.

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<sup>9</sup> The UN Security Council legitimized the attack and subsequently sent a mission called UNAMA, and this was covered by Article 51 of the United Nations' letter.

<sup>10</sup> Both Russia and Iran had bad relationships with the Taliban regime for different reasons.

<sup>11</sup> In January 2002, the war had cost only US\$3,800 million (Rashid, 2009, page 126).

<sup>12</sup> Bin Laden was killed in Pakistan on May 2011 by special forces of the United States (Racine, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> The appointment for acting president was decided at the Bonn Conference (Germany) and then ratified at the Loya Jirga (tribal assembly) in June 2002. Karzai won his first presidential elections in 2004 (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p 198).

The power vacuum left by the Taliban could not be filled by Karzai's weak puppet government and therefore local warlords became the real masters of the territory. Washington left the issue in hands of the CIA, which continued with the same bribe strategy.<sup>14</sup>

During the first years, the Dollars generously flowed into the warlords' pockets, who should maintain order in their respective fiefdoms. These warlords were ostentatiously enriched for many years with American bribes, but when dollars ceased to flow, they began to engage in the lucrative opium trade.<sup>15</sup> The production of this drug was progressively triggered after the American invasion and in 2006 Afghanistan produced 93% of the heroin that was consumed worldwide.<sup>16</sup>

In order to reinforce authority in the Karzai's Government, an allied military force in Kabul was deployed under a mandate from the UN, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), it began to operate from the end of December 2001. In spite of everything, at the end of 2002, the Taliban reappeared with a series of surprising attacks, which intensified over time. The weakness of the Karzai's puppet government, who barely controlled Kabul's territory and its surroundings, became increasingly apparent. To remedy the worsening situation, NATO assumed control of the ISAF from 2003 onwards sending troops deployments throughout the country.<sup>17</sup> At that time, the US military was stranded in Iraq and

needed help to address both fronts. With NATO's deployment, the situation did not improve, and began to seriously degrade from 2005 onwards.

Since 2004, the Northern Alliance unity had begun to crumble. The ethnic divisions between Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras became increasingly visible and the Alliance began to break down into different groups commanded by warlords. This situation contributed increasing chaos in Afghanistan. As opposition to the Kabul Government grew, the Taliban's strength had increased, they recruited a new batch of fundamentalists and took advantage of tribal resentments. In addition, they undertook a propaganda war and established links with the Iraqi resistance.<sup>18</sup> Within a couple of years, the Taliban had returned to Afghanistan and they controlled entire regions in the south and east of the country, from where they carried out a guerrilla war against NATO forces. This forced NATO to gradually increase its numbers in the Asian state.<sup>19</sup>

Karzai's unpopularity increased as the economic situation did not improve and insecurity increased.<sup>20</sup> The elections in November 2009 were surrounded by controversy over fraud allegations.<sup>21</sup> The opposition resigned to participate in the second round of the elections, which was an automatic re-election for President Karzai. There was a growing risk for this discontent to spread into an armed conflict, also towards the northern regions, where disputes between warlords were occurring more frequently. In addition, some

<sup>14</sup> During the invasion, the CIA spent between \$70 and \$100 Million Dollars on bribes (Rashid, 2009, p. 127).

<sup>15</sup> The US funding dramatically declined in 2004 and only recovered again in 2007 (Rashid, 2009, p.251).

<sup>16</sup> In 2002, it was estimated that the opium economy was equivalent to 40% of the country's legal economy and in 2004 it represented 60%. In the same year, 14% of the rural population was engaged in cultivating this plant (Herold, 2007, p.97).

<sup>17</sup> The number of NATO troops was 70,000 in 2008 (Rashid, 2009, p.528).

<sup>18</sup> As the CIA director acknowledged in 2006 (Rashid, 2009, p.363).

<sup>19</sup> At the beginning of 2010, it was composed of 150,000 soldiers plus the hired mercenaries (Charlier, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> According to the UN, 2.118 civilians died in the conflict in 2008, 2.414 in 2009 and 2.777 in 2010 (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p. 212).

<sup>21</sup> Hundreds of thousands of fake voting cards appeared with their names, reason why the results of the first round were annulled (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.221).

warlords, that were excluded by the Karzai Government, were rearming with support from Russia and China and did not recognize Kabul's authority.

The failure of bringing peace to Afghanistan was obvious. The instability situation led the new Obama administration in the United States to rethink its strategy (Sethi, 2009). Obama sent 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan to reinforce the Allied military,<sup>22</sup> but also proposed July 2011 as a first date to begin troop withdrawals. During the presidential campaign, the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan had been one of Obama's promises. Then, the date of 2011 was moved to 2014.

On the other hand, in January 2010, was held the London Conference and in July 2010 the Kabul Conference, where an agreement was reached between the warlords and a Taliban's sector, enabling them to participate within the State's administration in exchange for bringing peace to the territory. With this approach, Washington admitted NATO's incapacity to defeat the Taliban militarily.<sup>23</sup> In order to achieve a stronger position in the negotiations and give a positive image to the public opinion, NATO triggered throughout 2010, a random offensive coordinated with the Pakistan Army against the Taliban bases near the border with Pakistan.

In spite of everything, Afghanistan became the example of a failed state. The corruption affected

all levels, and all the actors involved in the conflict.

<sup>24</sup> The heroin cultivation and trafficking business financed the Taliban, the government and warlords. In the north, the warlords did not recognize Kabul's authority and were indifferent towards the Government policies. In the south and east, the Taliban reemerged and controlled the entire territory on both sides of the AfPak border.

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The Taliban maintained a hostile attitude towards Kabul and resisted all military offensives that were launched from Afghanistan on behalf of the NATO's troops, and from Pakistan, by the Pakistani Army (Idress, 2010). While in the military field resulted in a technical tie between opposing forces, in the political arena it was translated as a defeat for NATO. This defeat began to produce divisions among the alliance members. Canada was the first State that announced the withdrawal of its troops. It was followed by the Netherlands and subsequent abandonments that took place in stages.

The United States strategy for asserting its hegemony in the region by invading Afghanistan did not work. At the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>. century, NATO only controlled some areas of the Afghan territory and had not been able to end the resistance of different guerrilla groups (Jones, 2009). This military failure, together with the suspicions aroused in the governments of the region given the terrible US diplomacy, favored the return of Russian influence in the region and the

<sup>22</sup> In the second half of 2010, the maximum number of troops in Afghanistan was deployed, around 150,000, of whom 100,000 were Americans (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.212).

<sup>23</sup> The occupation troops only had 12 casualties in 2001, 70 in 2002, 58 in 2003, 60 in 2004, 131 in 2005, 191 in 2006, 232 in 2007, 295 in 2008, 521 in 2009 and 705 in 2010. More than half of these casualties are American Troops (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.212).

<sup>24</sup> For example, there is an important traffic of influences and bribery around protecting supply convoys of NATO troops (Roston, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> A term agreed by officials of the State Department and Pentagon regarding the operations theater in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

irruption of Chinese influence. On the other hand, the United States, far from promoting democracy and encouraging reforms in Central Asia, had strengthened the most autocratic and conservative structures.<sup>26</sup>

## ***THE CAUSES OF THE AFGHANISTAN OCCUPATION***

Why did the United States insist on the occupation of Afghanistan? If it was to cleanse its hegemonic power image that was wounded by the 9/11 attacks, a punishment operation against Al Qaeda and the Taliban would have been enough as an example for other possible enemies. However, the Bush Administration decided to occupy Afghanistan indefinitely and to support the survival of a puppet government. This decision had important economic costs and geopolitical risks, taking into account that all previous powers that had tried to control the region had failed. Therefore, it was hard to believe that Washington would face these risks and costs simply to keep track of Bin Laden.

So, what were the real reasons behind the US presence in Afghanistan? The positioning of great powers in the region to ensure the supply of energy resources seems to offer the most logical explanation (Brzezinski, 1998, Baltar, 2003). In fact, prior to 2001, the US oil corporations had already tried to establish themselves in Central Asia, not only in the production area, but also for distributing oil and gas. These corporations carried out negotiations with Afghanistan's Taliban Government to obtain preferential contracts that

would make Afghanistan the main transit point for oil and gas pipelines that would distribute Central Asia's energy wealth to the south, towards the Indian Ocean.<sup>27</sup>

The long years of the Afghanistan war had blocked an important trade route linking Central Asia with the Middle East, Iran and the Indian subcontinent. If Afghanistan would have managed the rehabilitation of its communication channels, its geographical location would have allowed it to become an important commercial hub in Asia. Therefore, Afghanistan had already become relevant on the global geopolitical arena before the 9/11 attacks (Brzezinski, 1998). The attacks on the United States provided an opportunity for Washington to launch a "legitimate" military attack that would allow the United States to impose a military presence in the region and to install a government favorable to its interests. The Taliban negotiations with US corporations were proceeding very slowly and a military intervention could accelerate the process. If the operation was successful, the United States would occupy a hegemonic position in the region, in the same way it had already done in the Persian Gulf.

For this reason, the United States Government used this as an excuse to attack Afghanistan in order to establish a permanent military presence in the region that would allow to exert an increasing influence (Quintana, 1987). The US military presence in Afghanistan would enable to control energy resources in Central Asia, on which other powers depended on to get supplies, such as China, Japan and the European Union. In addition, their

<sup>26</sup> There were only three changes in leadership of these States during globalization. There were the overthrows of Presidents; Akiyev (2005) and Bakiyev (2010) in Kyrgyzstan, and the death of Niyazov (2006) in Turkmenistan (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, pp. 138-139).

<sup>27</sup> It is known that the Central Asia and Caspian Basin regions contain natural gas and petroleum reserves that far exceed those in Kuwait, the Gulf of Mexico or North Sea (Brzezinski, 1998, p.30).

military presence would be intimidating to other regional powers, such as Russia and Iran, who should grant influence to the United States.

To assess the US strategy aggressiveness, we must take into account the growing energy resources scarcity and the intense competition that was unfolding in the global arena to ensure access to these resources. Experts estimated that since 1980 the exploitation rate of crude reserves exceeded the deposits discovery rate (Roberts, 2004). Therefore, the supply of these energy resources was becoming, increasingly, a main priority strategic issue.

The dispute over resources in the region between the great powers turned the Central Asia scenario into the Great Game <sup>28</sup> of the 21<sup>st</sup>. century. The United States lacked influence in this strategic region, that also included the neighboring States through which the Caspian region resources should be transported towards their final destination. In addition to resources strategic importance, these States also had importance for the United States regarding its strategy for enclosing Russia, since they formed Russia's southern border, which Washington had been trying to militarily penetrate for some time to complete this fencing.

The US failure in Afghanistan resulted in a general retreat. In 2001, the United States occupied a preponderant status in the region, but five years later Washington had lost the Great Game in Central Asia. Finally, the Bush Administration acknowledged its failure and had to give these territories to its contenders, China and Russia. The

US aid to Central Asia fell by 24% in 2008 (Rashid, 2009, p.447). For President Obama, the main concern about Afghanistan was to get troops out in the shortest time possible.

### ***AFGHANISTAN IN THE SPOTLIGHT***

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>. century, important oil and gas deposits were discovered around the Caspian Sea in Central Asia. <sup>29</sup> Several States disputed the exploitation of these resources (Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan). Immediately, corporations, mainly Chinese and European, were positioned in the region with the objective to be able to exploit energy resources. <sup>30</sup> Not in vain, China and the European Union were the two powers that most depended on the supply of these resources. The United States did not depend so much on these resources, but it had to play a central role in the region if it wanted to reaffirm its global hegemonic power. Therefore, in this region, the different interests of most world's powers were revealed, this gave rise to the Great Game of the 21<sup>st</sup>. century.

The traditional export route of Caspian resources to the West had been through Russia. In Central Asia, Russia had several pipelines that connected with the Caspian deposits in both north and west directions. These pipelines were inheritance of the Soviet Union era and had been modernized and expanded in the Russian era. Russia, through the Gazprom corporation, supplied 40% of gas imports by the European Union, which made Brussels very

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<sup>28</sup> This was the Anglo-Russian imperial rivalry for controlling Central Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup>. century.

<sup>29</sup> It is estimated that all the Caspian Sea combined oil reserves total more than 200 billion oil barrels, compared to the proven reserves that total 600 billion barrels in the Persian Gulf (Khanna, 2008, p.141).

<sup>30</sup> In 1997, the Chinese oil company CNPC began operating in Kazakhstan. In addition, Beijing and Akmola signed an agreement for building a 3000 km pipeline, in order to connect the Caspian region with Xinjiang (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, page 259).



dependent on Moscow.<sup>31</sup> This dependence situation had concerns in Brussels.<sup>32</sup> In addition, supply cuts were frequent due to disputes between Russia and Ukraine, where the gas pipeline crossed to the European Union.

Therefore, the energy issue had been gaining importance in the European foreign policy agenda and export routes through the Caucasus and Turkey offered an alternative. Although Moscow was reluctant to lose its preferential client and had invested many resources in building a new gas pipeline that avoided Ukrainian territory with two branches, one in the south and one in the north, that reached the European Union.<sup>33</sup> As a result, disputes between Kiev and Moscow would not affect the supply flow. However, the new gas pipelines did not prevent the European Union's excessive dependence on supplies from Russia, so the Caucasus showed itself as an alternate supply route.

For this reason, the Caucasus region suddenly took on strategic importance in regard to exploiting and transporting resources from the Caspian region to the West. The European and American corporations reached important agreements with the Azerbaijan and Georgia governments in the late 1990s which displaced Russian corporations. In regard to transportation, pipelines were built from the Caspian oil wells in Azerbaijan, then crossed Georgia and ended up in Turkey. The BTC pipeline (Baku-Tiflis-Ceyhan) was opened in 2005 and the BTE gas pipeline (Baku-Tiflis-Erzurum) in 2006. These pipelines sought to avoid

passage through Ukraine and Russia's territory and to ensure that the European Union was not so dependent from Russia in its energy strategy.

The new interests affected all geopolitics in the region. The United States, the European Union, Turkey, and in recent years Israel,<sup>34</sup> sought to maintain cohesion between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, with the aim of forming a front against Russian influence in the Caucasus and channeling the Caspian Sea resources towards Turkey, Europe and Israel. However, Russia skillfully exploited the disputes over territorial issues in the region. Armenia, with an ethnically homogeneous and Christian population, maintained strong cultural ties with Russia and maintained good relationships with Moscow anticipating a new conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.<sup>35</sup> In addition, Armenia economically survived thanks to Russian and Iranian investments, although in recent years Turkey was also increasing its investments (Khanna, 2008, p.102).

Although Azerbaijan had privileged its trade relationships with the West in Russia's detriment, Moscow still exerted some influence over Baku due to the presence of 2 million Azeris who worked in Russia. Perhaps for this reason, Azerbaijan refused to grant a military base in the Caspian Sea that NATO so insistently requested (Khanna, 2008, p.108). Iran and Turkey also sought to increase their influence in this State through commercial investments and important cultural ties that they shared. It should be taken into account that

<sup>31</sup> Russia is the point of origin for 21% of the oil and 40% of the gas consumed by the EU (Taibo, 2006, p.243).

<sup>32</sup> The European Commission foresees a 61% increase in EU gas consumption by 2030.

<sup>33</sup> Russia and Turkey collaborate in building the Blue Stream pipeline, which runs under the Black Sea and reaches the Samsun port in Turkey (Khanna, 2008, p.86).

<sup>34</sup> 20% of Israel's oil supply comes from the BTC (Khanna, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> A territory populated by a majority of Armenians within Azerbaijan (Brzezinski, 1998).

Azerbaijan's population was predominantly from a Shiite Muslim religion, same as in Iran, and was Turkish-speaking.

Georgia maintained a struggle with Moscow due to the conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These

territories located within Georgia aspired to secession and were backed by Russia against the Tbilisi's Government. This independence conflict was an expression of the population heterogeneity in this State.<sup>36</sup> In the summer of 2008, this conflict was about to be internationalized with the mobilization of troops by NATO in support of the Government and those of Russia in support of the independents (Cheterian, 2009). Economically, Georgia was an appendix of Azerbaijan and survived thanks to subsidies from the United States and the World Bank (WB). Tbilisi also benefited from significant investments from the European Union and Turkey for building infrastructures related to the pipelines that crossed its territory (Khanna, 2008, p.101).

The other important export route was headed towards the East. China was very aggressive in negotiating the purchase of natural gas and oil in the Caspian region, which resulted in an oil pipeline connecting the fields in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan with the Xinjiang region in China. This pipeline was completed in 2009 and allowed the export of energy resources from Central Asia to the Far East and avoided Russian pipelines (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, page 259). This allowed Beijing to strategically position itself with great strength in the region's energy sector. Its oil corporations signed important

exploitation contracts in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.<sup>37</sup>

In the south and east direction, a gas pipeline was built from Turkmenistan to Iran. The Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline (IPI) was planned from Iran, and was promoted by India and opposed by the United States for participating with Iran. China also supported this project providing funds and know-how to build a deep-water port in Gwadar (Pakistan) and thus have a transit terminal for oil imports from Iran and Africa that would reach China by sea or through Pakistan and along the Karakorum highway (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, page 258). However, the United States envisioned an alternative route, one in which they had very difficult relationships and different to the one in Iran. Afghanistan was the key to this alternative route to the south heading toward Pakistan and the Indian Ocean. The construction project of this pipeline, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI), which would distribute gas from eastern Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to the Pakistani coast in the Arabian Sea and India, this was what placed Afghanistan within the United States objectives.

## ***THE GREAT GAME IN THE 21ST CENTURY***

At the beginning, the American advance in the region was important. The Central Asian States maintained a lay foundation, inherited from the Soviet era, and feared the expansion of Islamist fundamentalism in the region. For this reason, they saw a threat in the Taliban who supported and welcomed Islamist fundamentalists throughout

<sup>36</sup> Although mostly Christian, 30% of the population is made up of diverse ethnic minorities (Brzezinski, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> In 2006, China was responsible for around 25% of oil extraction in Kazakhstan (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.260).

Central Asia.<sup>38</sup> This fear favoured that they joined with enthusiasm the US war effort in Afghanistan in 2001. The response from the public opinion was also favorable, since people were confident that the arrival of Americans would result in a democratic opening of these regimes.

In addition, the alliance with Washington could diminish Moscow's omnipresent influence. Except Iran, the other Caspian coastal states had been part of the Soviet Union and had traditionally orbited within the Russian sphere. It must be taken into account that the Central Asia region is a mosaic of ethnic groups and peoples that had encountered serious difficulties for decades before integrating into true national states.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, Russian influence had played a cohesive role for a long time in the region.

The region's autocratic governments hoped that friendship with the Americans would grant them international legitimacy and put an end to an isolation that had obstructed the arrival of foreign investments since the decomposition of the former Soviet Union. The transition to capitalism had been very complicated and had not been completely achieved in the region, so these states had been excluded from the globalization process. To overcome this obstacle, their economies had been fully integrated into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)<sup>40</sup> and the Eurasian

Economic Community (EurAsEC)<sup>41</sup>). They had also been integrated into a military alliance with Russia, since 1992, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)<sup>42</sup>). Politically, there had been hardly any changes since the Soviet Union's break-up.

Since the 1990s, Washington had used Turkey as an intermediary to exert its influence. Turkey was a NATO member with cultural and religious ties to the people and region. The idea was to export the Turkish political and economic model to these States and move them away from the Russian influence orbit. It was discussed during Turgut Özal's presidency in Turkey, the idea of creating a Turkic Union, similar to the European Union, from Bosphorus to China's border. However, both the Central Asian States and the Caucasus States that were part of this project chose to diversify their international relations and not to depend so much on Turkey.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the Western-style Turkish democratic model did not convince authoritarian regimes that were unwilling to give away any power.

Turkey's failure and the discovery of new energy reserves in the region drove Washington to move away from Ankara in the Great Game and began to become directly involved (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.228). Since 1994, all Central Asian States, except Tajikistan, had joined the NATO-

<sup>38</sup> Like the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) that operated throughout the region (Rashid, 2009, p.88).

<sup>39</sup> The majority speak Turkic languages, except for the Tajiks who are Iranian speakers and of course, the Russian speakers. Ethnically, the variety is even greater with Mongols, Turks, Persians, Europeans, etc. All these populations are mixed and give great heterogeneity to these States. The Kazakhs make up 50% of Kazakhstan's population. The Kyrgyz make up 60% in Kyrgyzstan. Uzbeks make up 80% in Uzbekistan. Turkmenos make up 77% in Turkmenistan. Tajiks make up 62% in Tajikistan (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.30).

<sup>40</sup> It is composed of 10 out of the 15 former Soviet republics, with an exception in regard to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Turkmenistan, which left the organization in 2005 to become an associate member; and Georgia, which withdrew in 2009.

Mongolia participates in some CIS structures as an observer. Ukraine is not a CIS member, because it has not ratified the organization's statute; however, it is a founding and member state.

<sup>41</sup> It was incorporated in the year 2000 and consists of: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan.

<sup>42</sup> Comprised by: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Azerbaijan and Georgia signed the treaty at the time, but then withdrew from the CSTO. Uzbekistan did the same, but it was reinstated in early 2006. Under this agreement, Russia maintains military bases in these States (Klare, 2003, p.125).

<sup>43</sup> For example, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan opened up to US and German investments, while Kyrgyzstan went towards China (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.226).



sponsored Partnership for Peace. In response to this initiative, in 1996, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.<sup>44</sup> which was established in 2001 also incorporating Uzbekistan.

Washington's interests were favored by Uzbekistan's change in alliance and Government changes in Georgia (2004)<sup>45</sup> and in Kyrgyzstan (2005)<sup>46</sup>. In name of the anti-terrorism fight and with the promise of great economic benefits, the United States obtained military bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan was the first State which allowed establishing a US military base on its territory in 2001. Two other US military bases were established in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the year 2002 (Rashid, 2009, p 215). In return, the United States invested US \$ 442 million in aid for the region in the year 2002. In addition, the WB president toured the region in the spring of 2002 and promised the arrival of IDE from all over the world (Rashid, 2009, page 211).

Washington, in order to avoid confrontation with Russia, persuaded Moscow that its military presence in the region was only temporary.<sup>47</sup> However, by 2002, it was clear that the deployment of US military bases in the region was increasing, so the Russians decided to counteract the American presence. Moscow pressured the Kyrgyz, who in 2002 granted building a Russian military base on their territory, a few kilometers away from the US base. China was also concerned about the US presence along its border in Tajikistan. Immediately, Beijing gathered an urgent CSO meeting and strengthened ties with the Central

Asian States with the intention of stopping American influence.

Since 2005, the American advance stopped in the region and things began to change. Russia had understood that it had lost great allies in the region and initiated a counter-offensive. The rise in oil prices benefited the Russian economy and Russian investments, therefore its influence grew in Central Asia. This favored the CIS strengthening and its military presence, which particularly increased in the Caucasus region. Russia had the advantage in regard that Caucasus and Central Asia States had a recent and fragile independence that was strongly impregnated with the Russian and Soviet colonial past before the 20<sup>th</sup>. century. Therefore, the ties with Russia were deep and recent in time.

On the other part, China played its cards in the region through massive IDE injections. The West Investment Program was extended to Central Asia neighboring States, which aimed to develop entire regions of western China, (Davidson, 2010). The Chinese government offered to construct important infrastructures in these states in exchange for concessions to exploit natural resources by its corporations (Khanna, 2008, p. 134).

This policy, besides opening new trade and supply routes for China, has generated a significant success for Beijing, who in recent years has significantly increased its influence in the region. China obtained minerals from Afghanistan, while Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Iran obtained gas

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<sup>44</sup> In 2004, Mongolia joined as an observer and one year later Iran, India and Pakistan also joined in. Belarus and Sri Lanka have the partners status for dialogue (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.268).

<sup>45</sup> Driven by the Revolution of roses.

<sup>46</sup> Driven by the Revolution of tulips.

<sup>47</sup> Also, at the NATO summit in May 2002, Russia was allowed to participate in the decision-making process (Rashid, 2009, p.210).

and oil.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the business volume between China and Central Asia went from US \$ 500 million in 1992 to more than US \$ 20 billion in 2008. <sup>49</sup> Meaning that the Chinese and Russian strategy based on diplomacy and trade negotiations was more successful than Western military actions.

In summary, the failure of the United States in occupying Afghanistan and gain influence in the region aroused the interest of other powers and thus increased tensions in a region where four States have nuclear capacity: Russia, China, India and Pakistan. <sup>50</sup> The Russian-Chinese alliance, which had a significant approach in the security agreement, resulted in incorporating the SCO as a military counterweight to NATO in the region, it seemed that this alliance at the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>. century was the winner. The common rejection to American and European interference, the fight against Islamist expansion and the drug trafficking control supported an understanding environment between the two great powers. However, there were also a lot of misgivings regarding the economic, military and demographic positioning of each other in the region.

### ***THE COMPLEX ALLIANCES SYSTEM IN CENTRAL ASIA***

Uzbekistan was the main objective in the region after Afghanistan for the United States. It had the most powerful Armed Forces and Karimov's Government had faced Moscow on many occasions. The Uzbek government had granted to

build the most important US military base in the region (the so-called K2) in exchange for important economic aid coming from Washington. In addition, the Uzbek Government was very actively involved in CIA activities against Islamist fundamentalists in the region.

However, when the color revolutions broke out in Georgia and Ukraine (2003 and 2004), the Uzbek government feared that it would be next on the list. All American organizations and foundations that were related to the color revolutions were quickly expelled from Uzbekistan. In addition, to counter US pressure, Karimov began talking to Moscow. In June 2004, Uzbekistan and Russia signed a security and defense agreement. In addition, Russian corporations such as Gazprom and LuKoil signed agreements to invest US \$ 2 billion in developing and exporting energy resources in Uzbekistan. These agreements increased up to US \$ 3 billion in 2007 while strengthening the commercial ties (Rashid, 2009, pp. 441, 447).

Relationships between Uzbekistan and the United States definitively deteriorated due to these events in the Asian country. On May 13, 2005, there were serious riots in Andijan's far east region, in which Islamist fundamentalists intervened. The next day, a massive demonstration was held to protest against the government. The Uzbek Army opened fire on the demonstration and around 1500 people died (Rashid, 2009, p.442). These events triggered an international condemnation led by the United States, only China and Russia backed the Government. The Karimov government

<sup>48</sup> China is one of the main trading partners of the region. For Kazakhstan it represents 15% of its foreign trade; for Kyrgyzstan 35%; for Tajikistan 11%; for Uzbekistan 6%; for Turkmenistan 2% (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p 256).

<sup>49</sup> Most trade is carried out with Kazakhstan, around 70% (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, page 255).

<sup>50</sup> For Brzezinski (1998): "This vast region, torn by violent hatreds and surrounded by powerful neighbors competing with each other, its likely to become an important battleground, both for wars between nation-states and most likely, for a prolonged ethnic and religious violence." (p.60).

interpreted the US criticism as an opposition sign on behalf of Washington and this set an end to the Uzbek-American collaboration.

Uzbekistan signed energy contracts with China worth US \$ 1 billion and agreed to build a pipeline towards China (Khanna, 2008, page 162). It also strengthened relationships with Russian corporations that controlled the mineral deposits exploitation. Finally, on July 29, 2005, the government gave the US military three months to evict the K2 base. Instead, they allowed a small NATO base to remain in charge of Germans. After the break with Washington, Russia quickly moved to reaffirm its influence in Uzbekistan and signed a military agreement in November which allowed Moscow to establish military bases in Uzbekistan. In response, the United States imposed trade sanctions on Uzbekistan, including the arms embargo. At the same time, at the SCO summit, Russia and China called for all US forces to leave Central Asia.

Even before 9/11, Kyrgyzstan was the only State in Central Asia that had approached the West trying to escape the domination exercised by Russia, China and Uzbekistan. In Kyrgyzstan there is an important minority that has an Uzbek origin.<sup>51</sup> Tensions between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations intensified with the Soviet Union's independence. After suffering repeated incursions on behalf of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) during the 1990s, in 1994, Kyrgyzstan had joined the Association for Peace sponsored by NATO. After 9/11, President Akayev granted the

Americans to establish a military air base in Manas. Under Moscow's pressure, Akayev also granted in 2002 building a Russian military base on their territory, a few kilometers away from the US base.

On March 24, 2005, after the parliamentary elections on which there were fraud accusations, a popular revolt occupied the main government buildings. It was known as the Tulip Revolution.<sup>52</sup> When the armed forces abandoned him, President Akayev fled to Moscow. The opposition leader, Bakiyev, was declared the new President, but failed to restore order in the country. Bakiyev obtained an endorsement at the polls in the presidential elections of 2009, managing a Kyrgyz nationalist speech. To gain popularity among his voters, Bakiyev had demanded that the United States renegotiate its rights over the military base in Manas.

Bakiyev maintained a precarious balance between the interests of Moscow and Washington. Kyrgyzstan was the only State in the world that hosted within its territory an air base of United States and another one from Russia. On the domestic level, Bakiyev's promised reforms that never came. A growing polarization of wealth between the north and south was added to the tensions between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. The popular discontent caused that during 2006 and 2007 the country had to live with continuous protests in the street which demanded immediate reforms. The population was very divided and dissatisfied with the successive government corruption. On April 7, 2010, the government

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<sup>51</sup> **The Kyrgyzians make up around 55% of the population; the Uzbeks, 13%; and the Russians, 15% (Brzezinski, 1998).**

<sup>52</sup> **The United States had invested US \$ 50 million in the Tulip Revolution. One of the most**

**active organizations was the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and was also supported by the Georgian Liberty Institute (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.180).**



ordered the arrest of several opposition leaders. Given this fact, there was a revolt in Talas, which later spread to other parts of the country. A provisional government was installed in power, headed by Otunbayeva, the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Bakiyev took refuge in the south of the country, where his support was greater among the ultra-nationalist Kyrgyz. At times it seemed that there could be a civil war between the north and south. In June 2010, there were serious riots in the south between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, in which hundreds were killed and thousands displaced. Quickly, the rumors spread that Bakiyev was the perpetrator of these disturbances. Public opinion was against the President who had made the decision to leave Kyrgyzstan and take refuge in Belarus.

With a provisional government, a new constitution was drafted, which was voted on June 27, 2010. Subsequently, on October 10 the parliamentary elections were held and Otunbayeva was kept as the provisional president until 2011. However, the country remained divided. The main resistance to the new Government was in the south of the country. The ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks still fueled many resentments and could catalyze into new confrontations (Cheterian, 2009). On the other hand, fundamentalist Islamism was also on the rise.

Tajikistan did not have energy resources, but it was a decisive bridge for commercial routes in the region that connected China, Afghanistan and Iran. In 1992, after the fall of Kabul into the hands of the mujahideen, a violent civil war (1992-1999) broke out in Tajikistan between the country's

northern and southern clans having a strong Islamist component.<sup>53</sup> The governments of the region, including Moscow, feared an expansion like wildfire of fundamentalist Islamism (Cooley, 2002, p.268). Through Moscow, a peace agreement was signed between the parties in 1997. In addition, Russia established military forces in the country anticipating the reappearance of violence. Since the Afghanistan invasion, NATO also had an air base in the country. India also achieved the concession of a military air base in Aini in 2002.<sup>54</sup> The Aini Indian military base was viewed with suspicion by the Pakistanis, Chinese and Russians, and represented the culmination of Tajikistan's foreign policy, which sought to maintain a precarious balance between the five powers interests.

Previously, the Tajik government tried to counteract the Russian influence and strengthened an alliance with Iran. As a cooperation sign, Tehran financed the construction of a tunnel through the Fan Mountains that would connect Dushanbe with Juyand and this would allow the two main Tajik cities to be communicated throughout the year for the first time. Also, China's influence began to be felt and promoted an energy and commercial corridor between China and Iran that crossed through Tajikistan. However, opening these new commercial routes also caused the drug trafficking business to thrive in neighboring Afghanistan. This situation was worrying Russia, China, Iran, the United States and the European Union, who feared that the drug trafficking thrive could become a destabilizing factor for the fragile social peace in the Asian State (Khanna, 2008, p.153).

<sup>54</sup> In addition to Aini, the Indian air forces also operated at the Fakhor air base, although this base had a lower capacity.

<sup>53</sup> The conflict claimed between 100,000 and 150,000 lives (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.129).

Kazakhstan sought to maintain an equal distance from the great powers. It exported oil through the Caspian Sea towards Europe, through the north to Russia and through the east to China. The European and American oil corporations swiftly positioned themselves to control the exploitation of the country's main energy resources. From the Aqtau port in the Caspian Sea, Kazakh oil tankers transported oil to Baku in Azerbaijan, where it was incorporated into the flow of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and then transported towards Europe.

However, the Kazakh Government avoided having exclusive commercial relations with the European Union and the United States. In the first decade of the 21st century, Kazakhstan's main trading partner erupted: China. The Chinese oil corporations Sinopec and CNPC achieved important exploitation contracts. In 2005, Beijing finalized the construction of the main pipeline in a record time, this pipeline supplied China from the Caspian deposits. This pipeline ran from Atasu to Alashankou which crossed all the Kazakhstan's territory.

However, Kazakhstan's main strategic links were established with Russia. Besides from the important commercial agreements with the Russian corporation Gazprom, Akmola strengthened its ties with Moscow to unite the respective natural gas networks. A customs union and an open zone were negotiated for investments between both States. The military collaboration also narrowed. In fact, Akmola rejected the insistent requests of Europeans and Americans to build NATO military bases on their territory, as

this action would harm their relations with Russia. To understand their preference for Russia, it should be noted that the country is very ethnically divided<sup>55</sup> and has a strong presence of Russian origin population. For that reason, the ties with Russia were solid and their Government chose in recent years to maintain a strong alliance with Moscow.

In Turkmenistan, there was a policy change when the autocratic President Nizayov died during office on December 2006. Nizayov had not allowed the European or American corporations who wanted the Turkmen resources to penetrate their territory. His replacement, Berdymukhamedov, promised some changes, but he just started some weak reforms. The ambitious project to build a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan that crossed through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India was stopped due to Afghanistan's instability. For this reason, the Russian corporation Gazprom, heiress of the Soviet gas pipelines that connected with Turkmenistan, maintained preponderance within the country's trade resources. The new Turkmen government aspired to liberate itself from Russian domination, but could not establish alternative routes for exporting its resources.

## *THE OVERFLOW OF THE AFGHAN CONFLICT*

Beyond the consequences for Afghanistan, the Afghan conflict began to destabilize the entire region (Schofield, 2003). His neighbor, Pakistan, was imbued with chaos that seemed to announce a civil war. Pakistan had joined the war against

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<sup>55</sup> **30% of its population is from Russian origin and there is another 20% that is not Kazakh (Brzezinski, 1998).**

terrorism that Washington proclaimed from the outset. However, this decision of the Musharraf Government was gaining unpopularity among Pakistanis. Above all, the Islamist and conservative parties distanced themselves from the government in their decision to ally themselves with the United States in the conflict.

This unleashed different revolts and Islamist-inspired terrorist attacks in the country. The attack that had greater political relevance was the assassination of presidential candidate, Benazir Bhutto, on December 27, 2007. Due to the country's increasing violence, in the summer of 2008 Musharraf was forced to resign. The Ali Zardari's new government, Bhutto's widow, took over and applied a pure pro-western policy. This guaranteed Pakistan the support of the United States and the European Union, but it was generating strong internal tensions within the country with the most conservative nationalist and religious sectors (Racine, 2011).

In Afghanistan, since the Soviet withdrawal, the Pakistani secret services, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), had tried to place in power in Kabul allied groups associated with Pakistan. With this strategy they aimed to secure a solid alliance with Afghanistan and keep India's influence away. Pakistani military strategists saw Afghanistan as an extension of their territory and of vital importance in the event of war with India.

and were in opposition with the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and Turkmen, who received support from India, Russia and Iran. For all these reasons, they were the natural allies of Pakistanis in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's defeat in 2001 and the Northern Alliance's victory represented a serious setback for Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan. For almost a decade, Islamabad had managed to block Indian influence in Afghanistan thanks to the Taliban. Now, with Karzai's Government, all that framework was coming down and the only card left to play by Islamabad were the Taliban themselves. For that reason, Pakistan boycotted the new Afghan government and offered safe haven to the Taliban fleeing from Afghanistan, thinking about their return to Kabul in the mid-term. In a short time, the Afghan Taliban were resettled in shelters in Pakistan. Other fundamentalist armed groups were also strengthened, such as the Haqqani and Hizb-e-Islami formed by Pakistani Pashtuns.

The Pakistani regions on the border with Afghanistan, the so-called FATA,<sup>56</sup> became the operations headquarters from which the Taliban launched their attacks in Afghanistan. The Pakistani government was convinced that the US presence in Afghanistan would be short-lived and things would return to their normal course. Islamabad's game was double sided; On one hand, it supported the Taliban, but, on the other, it showed itself before the United States as the only firm stronghold in the region to stop Islamist fundamentalism.

The reality is that the Pakistani government was playing with fire. The Taliban's growing activity in Pakistan was becoming an obstacle, as it was

Panorama | The Taliban fundamentalists were perceived by the  
pp. 9-25 | ISI, from the outset, as the ideal candidate to fulfill  
Volumen 10 | this link function between Islamabad and Kabul  
Número 18 | (Schofield, 2003). The Taliban belonged to the  
Enero-junio | Pashtun ethnic group, who also lived in Pakistan,

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2016 | <sup>56</sup> What is known as the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas).



deteriorating relations between Islamabad and the United States. The alliance of the Pakistani military with the Islamist fundamentalists to stop the democratic opposition front <sup>57</sup> had fueled the fundamentalists radicalism who now had turned against the Government interests.

The explosive political alliance between the Pakistani military and the Islamist came from the crisis of the Sharif Government in Pakistan in 1999. During that spring, Army sectors began an offensive in Kashmir without Government approval. For a few days, India and Pakistan experienced a dangerous escalation of tensions on the border, in which there were clashes between the two armies. Finally, pressure from the United States and the international community forced the Pakistani Government to withdraw its troops. A few months later, the Army resentful against the Sharif's government, gave a coup d'état and imposed a military dictatorship led by General Musharraf.<sup>58</sup> The military sought political support from Islamist groups in order for their regime to achieve a minimum degree of legitimacy and counteract opposition from Sharif's conservatives and Bhutto's progressives.

Since 2004, the Pakistani army that was under severe pressure from Washington started successive offensives against Taliban bases in border regions with Afghanistan. These attacks caused numerous civilian deaths and refugees, which was used by Islamist parties to criticize the Government and create a public opinion against pro-American policy. Again, US pressure on the Pakistani

government was felt during the 2006-2007 winter. The Pakistani military in power at the time, feared a cut in US aid, which amounted around US \$ 10 billion between 2002 and 2006 (Rashid, 2009, p.476), and for this reason they launched offensives against Taliban bases on the border.

Once again, the conflict erupted in the border regions where the Taliban operated back in July 2007, after the army's bloody assault on the Red Mosque in Islamabad, where a group of Islamists was cornered. <sup>59</sup> In response to the Army's attack, the Taliban waged war in the FATA region. The army launched a strong offensive against the Taliban that were hiding in the mountains, but they responded with a surge of attacks across the country in which 927 people were killed. <sup>60</sup> In December, the Taliban formed an alliance named the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan <sup>61</sup> (TTP) which grouped all the Pakistani Taliban. During this offensive, in October, Bhutto was victim of a previous attack in Karachi, which he survived, but killed 140 people.

The internal instability had already worried Washington, who had forced Musharraf to hold parliamentary elections. During the electoral campaign, on December 27, 2007, the main opposition leader, Benazir Bhutto, was killed in a massive attack. The government blamed the Pakistani Taliban, but part of the population distrusted the military itself. Musharraf delayed the election date until February 18, 2008. In the following days, there were riots and attacks throughout the country in which 400 people were

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<sup>57</sup> **The Alliance for Restoring Democracy (ARD) was made up of all non-religious political parties (Rashid, 2009, p.301).**

<sup>58</sup> **Musharraf was Pakistan's president between 1999 and 2008.**

<sup>59</sup> **The operation death toll is calculated between 100 and 300 (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, page 205).**

<sup>60</sup> **That year there were 71 suicide bombings in Pakistan (Rashid, 2009, pp. 487, 497, 518).**

<sup>61</sup> **Taliban Movement of Pakistan.**

killed (Rashid, 2009, p.501). Finally, the elections were held in an atmosphere of great tension and low participation. The opposition coalition was clearly imposed at the polls; therefore, the military block and Islamists were defeated. With the new coalition government, Musharraf was cornered in his presidency.

However, peace did not return to the country. During the first ten weeks of 2008 there were 17 suicide attacks in which 274 people died. The instability was becoming a chronic disease in Pakistan, which was on the edge of civil war. Throughout 2008, “7.997” people were killed as a result of violence in Pakistan (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.207). For this reason, there were disagreements within the ruling coalition and conservatives abandoned the government.

In August, the Army launched a major offensive in northern Pakistan, where the Taliban were making great progress. More than 250,000 people were displaced due to the war and joined the other 400,000 refugees, who had already fled in previous operations (Rashid, 2009, p.522). For the first time, US troops began to intervene in ground operations on Pakistani soil, which angered Army sectors and Pakistani public opinion.

The severe situation caused Musharraf to resign and to voluntarily exile himself on August 18, 2008. Ali Zardari, Bhutto’s widow, was elected the new president of Pakistan in 2008. Washington is putting pressure on the new government in order for Pakistan to assume a greater commitment in archiving peace in Afghanistan and counteract Iran’s possible influence. In return, Pakistan would economically benefit from building pipelines that would unite Central Asia with the Arabian Sea.

However, if Pakistan tilted too much towards the United States, it risked to weaken its historical ties with China and to promote anti-Americanism which was very present in the country. Increasingly, more Pakistanis did not like their government's collaboration with the United States in regard to the conflict in Afghanistan. This schizophrenic situation was leading the country towards a path of civil war.

## ***THE IMPLICATIONS OF NEW ACTORS***

Other regional powers that were involved in the Great Game and burst of the AfPak conflict were India and Iran. In India, New Delhi defined its strategy in the region in response to the growing influence of China and Pakistan's maneuvers in Afghanistan. Similarly, India seemed willing to favor Iran in detriment of Pakistan. On the other hand, India did not oppose to restore Russian influence in the Central Asian region, as long as they were not associated with the Chinese establishment. The Indian Government also wanted to position itself in regard to trade with Central Asian States and proposed building a highway that would connect India with Central Asia through Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Building these infrastructures would allow them to access the region and participate in commercial relationships competing with China and Russia.

On the other hand, India gave its unconditional support to the Karzai Government and established a significant diplomatic presence in the country. New Delhi wanted to promote stability and a transition in Afghanistan towards a moderate

regime and distanced from Pakistani influence (Saint-Mézard, 2010). To promote this objective, the Indian Government invested large amounts of money in cooperation projects in Afghanistan, through numerous Indian cooperation organizations that were deployed on the ground. Projects ranging from building infrastructures and improving services to the population, placed New Delhi as one of the main international donors in Afghanistan.

This pulse between India and Pakistan to increase influence over Afghanistan arose from the rivalry between two States since their independence, which lasted throughout the cold war and reached the twenty-first century.<sup>62</sup> This rivalry easily translated into international tensions if we take into account that both States possessed nuclear weapons.<sup>63</sup> During the globalization period, both India and Pakistan had to face international economic sanctions after performing nuclear tests in 1998. These sanctions paralyzed Pakistan's economy and were not lifted until 2001, Washington lifted the sanctions to reward Islamabad for participating in the fight against terrorism. In exchange for their collaboration, Pakistan obtained important economic and military aid from the United States.<sup>64</sup>

During those years, Pakistan was Washington's privileged ally in the region. However, the disagreements we have already seen between Pakistan and the United States, caused Washington to begin seeking an approach with India. In the summer of 2007, the United States

and Indian Government signed an agreement that recognized and legitimized the Indian civil nuclear program and qualified India as a "responsible nuclear power". This agreement represented the implicit acceptance of India as a nuclear power, even if it was not recognized by the NPT. On the other hand, this agreement laid the foundations for cooperation in the fight against terrorism between the two States and made India, Washington's main geostrategic ally in the region, with the common objective of containing the growing Chinese influence.

Another important actor that was involved in the conflict was Iran. Since the decolonization, the port of Karachi in Pakistan had been the natural exit to the sea for trade routes through Afghanistan. However, after the US invasion, the enmity between the Kabul and Islamabad Governments, displaced trade towards Iranian ports. A series of trade agreements between Afghanistan, Iran, India and the Central Asian States during the winter of 2002-2003 created new geopolitical links. India, who could not trade with Afghanistan through Pakistani territory, backed the agreement and financed building new highways linking Iran and Afghanistan (Rashid, 2009, pp. 249-250).

The strategic role of Iran gained enormous importance. Iran was the only State with the possibility for exploitation in the two most important oil deposits in the world, the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. In addition, Tehran had an increasing influence on the population in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. It also strengthened

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<sup>62</sup> Now days, the Pakistani ISI accuses the Indian intelligence service, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), of financing the Baloch tribe insurgency in Balochistan (Pakistan), while the RAW accuses the ISI of financing the Maoists and Kashmiri rebel groups in northern India (Rashid, 2009, p.161).

<sup>63</sup> Pakistan obtained nuclear weapons in the late 1980s from China, and India had obtained them earlier from the former Soviet Union.

<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Japan and the EU renegotiated the debt payment and offered new loans and concessions to Pakistan. Thus, by 2003, half of Pakistan's foreign debt had been amortized (Rashid, 2009, pp. 116, 301).

ties with Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan (Veiga and Mourenza, 2012, p.292). The enmity of their Government with the United States placed the Persian State at the center of the strongest threats that Washington was launching. The United States could not allow Iran to emerge as a regional power, for it to drag other states into incorporating a security and commercial system that would be autonomous from Washington's influence.

On the other hand, Iran had a moderate support from Russia and China. Iran played an important role as a supplier and ally in China's plans to obtain oil and gas from the Central Asian region. For Russia, the alliance with Iran could represent access to the Persian Gulf, a region that has been controlled by the United States in the past decades. This fact would be an achievement that the former Soviet Union did not achieve. For these reasons, China and Russia included Iran as an observer State in the SCO, meaning, within its security strategy.

## **CONCLUSION**

The invasion in Afghanistan in the year 2001 has reactivated the geopolitical disputes in the region, which had remained dormant since the 19<sup>th</sup>. century. These disputes have new action lines and presence of new actors. However, the main objective remains the same. The control or strategic presence in the center of Eurasia remains to be the main objective of the States in dispute. The dispute to reach this goal requires great complexity in the 21<sup>st</sup>. century, due to the numerous presence of actors and the crossing of interests that have been generated. This complex dispute will follow a

tendency in the next few years and deserves the attention of researchers.

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