



## THREE SCENARIOS FOR REGIONAL GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS AFTER THE TALIBAN RETURNED TO POWER IN AFGHANISTAN

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*On 14 April 2021, US President Joe Biden announced that, starting on 1 May (2021), US troops will withdraw from Afghanistan, ending 20 years of war on Taliban terrorism. At a first glance, the Americans' decision seems to be a hasty withdrawal from a very costly war of attrition. On closer inspection, however, the events in Afghanistan seem to part of a realpolitik strategy, which seeks to reset the geopolitical game in Eurasia and beyond. So, what could be the potential geopolitical impact of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan? How could the regional game be reset after August 2021? This article, written immediately after the "fall" of Kabul on 15 August 2021, and the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan, proposes three scenarios for regional geopolitical dynamics and their global implications.*

*Keywords: Afghanistan; Pashtuns; Taliban; "World Balkans"; Realpolitik;*

*Motto:*

*“Asia is a body of water and clay, of which the Afghan nation forms the heart; The whole of Asia is corrupt, if the heart is corrupt; Its decline is the decline of Asia; Its rise is the rise of Asia; The body is free only as long as the heart is free; The heart dies with hatred but lives with faith”.*

Mohammed Iqbal (1877-1938),  
Pakistani poet and politician

## WHO ARE THE TALIBAN ?

The Taliban Movement is described as a Deobandi Movement, a title taken from the *Darul Uloom Deoband – House of Knowledge from Deoband* seminar, founded in 1867 in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, India. The founders of the Deobandi Movement belonged to the moderate Hanafi legal school<sup>1</sup>, which standardised Sunni Islam in the Mughal and the Ottoman Empires (except for North Africa). Aiming at the revival of Indian Islam assaulted by British and Hindu civilizations, the founders of the Movement thought the development of a system of clerical educational institutions designed to train imams capable of “awakening” the conscience of the Muslims in the Indian Peninsula. Thus, in 1967, 100 years after the founding of the first seminary, there were 8,934 Deobandi schools, mostly in the Indian Peninsula, as well as in other countries such as China, Afghanistan, Malaysia (Puri, 2009). Deobandi teachings created followers, especially among the Pashtun population, located on either side of the Durand line<sup>2</sup> – the 2,670-kilometer-long colonial border separating Afghanistan from today’s Pakistan, passing through the middle of the Pashtun-populated territory. They did not have the same success in Punjab, where the population preferred the Barelvi Islam, also Hanafi, but accompanied

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<sup>1</sup> Founded by the cleric Abū Ḥanīfa an-Nu‘man ibn Thābit (700–767). It accepts the largest share of secular sources in the Shariah structure of all Sunni law schools. Therefore, it combines the precepts of the Qur’an, the custom and consensus of scholars with individual reflection, analogy (Qiyas), legal preference (Istihsan) and local tradition (Urf). See Popescu (2020).

<sup>2</sup> From the name of the British diplomat Henry Mortimer Durand (1850-1924), who, on 12 November 1893, negotiated and drew the border between Afghanistan led by Emir Abdur Rahman Khan (1840/1844-1901) and British India. See Smith (2004).



*An important role in altering the political philosophy of the Deobandi towards Hanabilah ultra-conservatism was played by the deep poverty that affected the majority Pashtun population in the 1990s and made them vulnerable to aids received from the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamist Network. Another important role was played by the presence in the Pakistani area, since the late 1940s, of the teachings and organisations established by the local leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, the journalist and cleric Sayyid Abū'l-A'īā Mawdūdī (1903–1979). Mawdūdī was the founder of Jamaat-i-Islami – the Islamic Society.*

by a significant Sufi practice<sup>3</sup>, a mystical practice rejected by the Deobandi and especially by the followers of the ultra-conservative Hanabilah law school<sup>4</sup>, gathered in the *Ahl-e-Hadith – The People of the Command Movement*, established in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in Northern India.

The Hanafi moderation of the Deobandi seminaries was replaced by Hanabilah radicalism during the 1980s, amid the Afghan-Soviet War (1979-1989), when Saudi petrodollars and the entire financial system of the Muslim Brotherhood, along with US logistics, provided by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Pakistani intelligence service, supported the mujahideen front, in which the vast majority of combat-able Pashtuns enlisted (Berman, 2003). This is a publicly acknowledged issue by Pakistani cleric Akbar Zaidi, who said the Deobandi Islam in Pakistan and Afghanistan strayed from its Indian “roots” due to several factors, one of them being the influence of Saudi Wahhabism (Zaidi, 2009). An important role in altering the political philosophy of the Deobandi towards Hanabilah ultra-conservatism was played by the deep poverty that affected the majority Pashtun population in the 1990s and made them vulnerable to aids received from the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamist Network. Another important role was played by the presence in the Pakistani area, since the late 1940s, of the teachings and organisations established by the local leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, the journalist and cleric Sayyid Abū'l-A'īā Mawdūdī (1903–1979). Mawdūdī was the founder of *Jamaat-i-Islami – the Islamic Society*, which became the largest Islamist organisation in Asia. He was a continuator of the ideological line opened by the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian theologian Hassan al-Bannā (1906-1949), according to whom “*political power exists only to enforce Shariah, the only system of laws able to eradicate the secular, socialist and liberal-democratic ignorance in which the Islamic world sank*” (Popescu, p. 84). The ideology of the mentioned teachings and organisations resonated with that of the already existing *Ahl-e-Hadith*, so that the traditional Pashtun Deobandi capitulated in front of the ultra-conservative assault, becoming part of the Global Islamist Network (ib., pp. 144-210).

<sup>3</sup> The inner, mystical dimension of Islam emphasises the Great Jihad, man’s struggle with his sins, and man’s relationship with an accessible God. See Asghar (2009).

<sup>4</sup> From the name of its founder, the Bedouin cleric Ahmad bin Hanbal (780–855). He completely rejects the secular sources in the Shariah structure.



As the population shift, following the partition of India in 1947, was not absolutely perfect, a significant percentage of Indian Muslims (about 10% of the total population of India today, representing about 160 million) chose to stay in Hindu India, especially in the North of the state, the birthplace of the Deobandi Movement. Therefore, there is a major risk of ultra-conservative ideological contamination, followed by radicalisation, of Indian Deobandi Muslims, which would detonate security and stability throughout the Indian Peninsula. Risk is closely monitored and controlled by Indian authorities that have called on local Deobandi leaders to go public and condemn the insurgent Islam of terrorist organisations belonging to the Secret Apparatus of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ib., pp. 147-192). Thus, on 25 February 2008, *Darul Uloom* hosted a conference of scholars in Deoband to discuss the issue of terrorism, at which a *fatwa* – a religious edict unanimously condemning all acts of terrorism in the name of Islam – was unanimously adopted (Puri).

Not coincidentally, the Deobandi Movement in Afghanistan is named after the Taliban, which in Arabic means students, knowing that the Islamist Network places a special emphasis on Islamic education and the complete memorisation of the Qur'an, Sunnah and al-Banna's writings, also considering that, originally, Deobandi was built on a system of theological seminaries designed to educate students in the spirit of Islamic teaching.

The Taliban movement was founded in 1994 by Mullah Mohammed Omar (1960-2013), former *mujahedeen* – soldier of Allah in the Afghan-Soviet War, a graduate of the Deobandi seminary in the Pakistani town of Akora Khattak (Waraich, 2015). The seminar was led by cleric Maulana Sami-ul-Haq (1937-2018), a member of the Islamist political movement *Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam* – Assembly of Islamic Clerics, also known as the "father of the Taliban" (Imtiaz, 2007). In 1996, Omar established the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, with its *de facto* capital in Kandahar and *de jure* one in Kabul. In 2001, he ordered the destruction of Buddha statues in Bamyan, carved in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. After 11 September 2001, Omar was black-listed by the United States government, which issued a warrant for hosting and supporting Al Qaeda's actions against America. But Omar was never arrested and died of tuberculosis on 23 April 2013. Some authors claim that the Islamist's death occurred in the Afghan town of Zabul,

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*The initial success of the Taliban Movement is closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, the CIA and the Pakistani secret service (Inter-Services Intelligence – ISI). The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan left the “Pashtun belt” in a state of glaring poverty, administrative disintegration and chaos. In this context, the region fell under “warlords” rule, former mujahideen commanders who took control over the main access routes, especially the strategic corridor Quetta - Kandahar - Herat, which links Pakistan, in the Southeast, with Iran, Turkmenistan and Turkey, in the Northwest.*

near an American military base (Deutsche Welle, 2019), others that it happened in Pakistan, in a hospital in Karachi (Goldstein, Shah, 2015). For two years, his death was hidden by the Taliban, being revealed in July 2015 by the National Security Directorate of Afghanistan (Onyanga-Omara, Lackey, 2015).

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Figure no. 1: Political map of Afghanistan

(Source: [http://www.ettoremazza.com/mapimages/middle\\_east/afghanistan/afghanistan.gif](http://www.ettoremazza.com/mapimages/middle_east/afghanistan/afghanistan.gif), retrieved on 15.08.2021).



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As a result, in October 1994, the Taliban Movement emerged in the region. Well-armed and equipped with vehicles that it would have found following a raid on a warehouse on the border with Pakistan, the Movement was able to take control of the corridor and the city of Kandahar. In December 1994, the Taliban already controlled 12 of the country's 31 provinces, and in 1995 about 90 percent of the Afghan territory.

There are many voices linking the Movement to the Pakistani secret service, ISI (India Today, 2021), and explaining its military victories through the support received from Pakistan (Smith, Grey, 2021).

Moreover, during the Afghan-Soviet War and after the Soviet withdrawal, there are well known the links among the CIA, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Mujahideen Front in Afghanistan, whose main ideologue was the Palestinian cleric Abdullah Yusuf Azzam (1941–1989). Nicknamed *“Father of the Global Jihad”*, Azzam mentored Osama bin Laden (1957-2011). He was the founder of Al-Qa’ida, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba and other terrorist organisations as well as of the Maktab al-Khidamat (Al Kifah) logistical structure, which provided material support to the mujahideen, from training camps and field hospitals to military equipment and military vehicles (Popescu, p. 184). During the previous Taliban administration, the Emirate’s main sources of income came from smuggling – which prospered so much that, between 1993 and 1997, led to a \$ 400 million drop in Pakistani customs revenue – and, in particular, from trafficking opioids, which had exceeded \$ 1 billion in 1997 (Berman).

Therefore, we can conclude that the Taliban Movement is an ultra-conservative, radical Islamist movement, included in the Global Islamist Network of the Muslim Brotherhood. The circumstances of its occurrence and its subsequent evolution argue in favour of the logistical support received from Pakistan, without completely excluding, at least in its early days, its links with the CIA, knowing that in the 1990s the Agency was still in a close connection with Muslim Brotherhood and the forces of the mujahideen in Afghanistan.

## THE GEOPOLITICAL AND GEOSTRATEGIC VALUE OF AFGHANISTAN

Geographically, according to data provided by the *CIA WorldFactBook*, Afghanistan is a medium-sized country (652,230 sq km), landlocked, located in South Asia. In the North, it borders China and three former Soviet states: Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In the West,

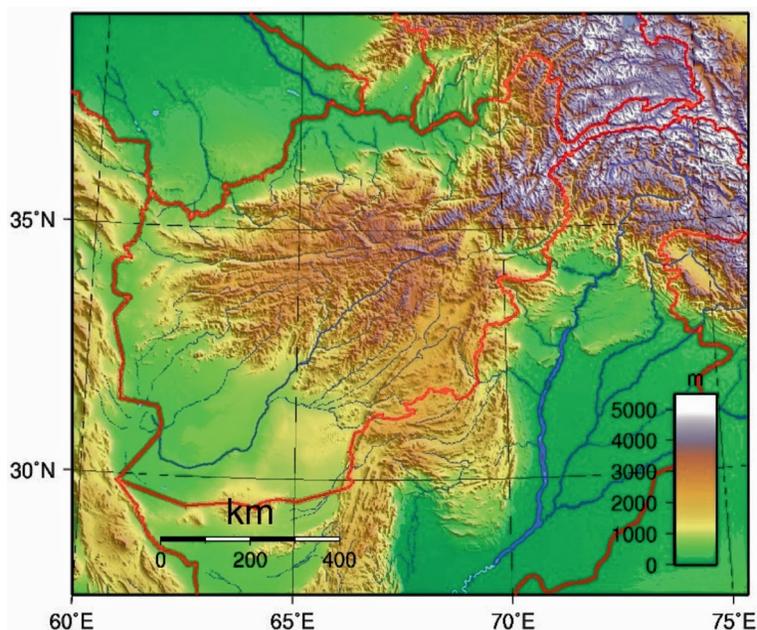
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*On the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, the Amu Darya River originates. It offers navigable access, along a length of 1,200 km, for ships up to 500 DWT. The Amu Darya River corridor partially opens the country, as it communicates, through the Karakum Canal, with the Caspian Sea, and ends in a Delta in the Aral Lake.*

it borders Iran. In the South and East, it borders Pakistan (see the map in *figure no. 1*). Its relief is predominantly mountainous. The Hindu Kush Mountain range, with altitudes between 3,000 and 7,000 meters, which extends from Northeast to Southwest, separates the Northern provinces from the rest of the country (see the map in *figure no. 2*). In the Southwest and North there are plains. The climate is arid and semi-arid. The hydrographic network consists mainly of rivers that either flow outside the country into the Arabian Sea, or flow into endorheic basins in Afghanistan.

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*Figure no. 2: Topographic map of Afghanistan*

(Source: <https://www.mapsland.com/maps/asia/afghanistan/large-topographical-map-of-afghanistan.jpg>, retrieved on 15.08.2021).



Figure no. 3: The Amu Darya and the Syr Darya rivers  
(Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/85/Aral\\_map.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/85/Aral_map.png),  
retrieved on 15.08.2021).



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*Geopolitically, Afghanistan is a compact state, with no exclaves or enclaves on its territory. The capital, Kabul, is located eccentrically, in the North of the country, in the mountainous area. This is the reason why it does not exert a sufficiently strong force of attraction on the entire territory, thus being explained the periodic appearance of a second de facto capital in the Southern town of Kandahar.*

The main natural riches of Afghanistan are natural gas, oil, coal, copper ores, gold, chromite, barium, lead, zinc, lithium, iron ore, talc deposits, salt, precious and semi-precious stones, arable land covering 11.8% of the total area of the country and agricultural land representing 58.1% of the Afghan territory (CIA WorldFactBook, 2021).

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The introduction of the phrase Middle East (and of Afghanistan in this area) to the public circuit is due to American Admiral Alfred T. Mahan (1840-1914), the author of the article entitled *The Persian Gulf and International Relations*, published in 1902 in "National Review" magazine. In this article, the great geostrategist defines the Middle East as the area of great strategic value, between Arabia and India, which surrounds the Persian Gulf, the most important corridor that Great Britain will control, after the Suez Canal.

It is currently the second largest city in the country and an important trade centre, being known as a major market for marijuana and hashish (Burch, 2010).



Figure no. 4: Middle East

(Source: <https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:AND9GcTHO2liBQzFGQx4vU4BhdEda8qL7oTv2uS76w&usqp=CAU>, retrieved on 15.08.2021)

Also from a geopolitical point of view, Afghanistan belongs, according to some authors, to the Middle East region (see the map in *figure no. 4*), while other authors include it in the Extended Middle East (see the map in *figure no. 5*). The introduction of the phrase Middle East (and of Afghanistan in this area) to the public circuit is due to American Admiral Alfred T. Mahan (1840-1914), the author of the article entitled *The Persian Gulf and International Relations*, published in 1902 in "National Review" magazine. In this article, the great geostrategist defines the Middle East as the area of great strategic value, between Arabia and India, which surrounds the Persian Gulf, the most important corridor that Great Britain will control, after the Suez Canal. The region is later described, in 1957, by the US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (1888-1959) as "the area between, and including Libya in the West and Pakistan in the East, Syria and Iraq in the North and the Arabian Peninsula in the South, plus Sudan and Ethiopia" (Davison, 1960). Subsequently, during the George W. Bush Jr. Administration (2001-2009), the phrase *Extended Middle East* is introduced, defining a geopolitical over-zone that includes the Maghreb, Central Asia and the Caucasus.

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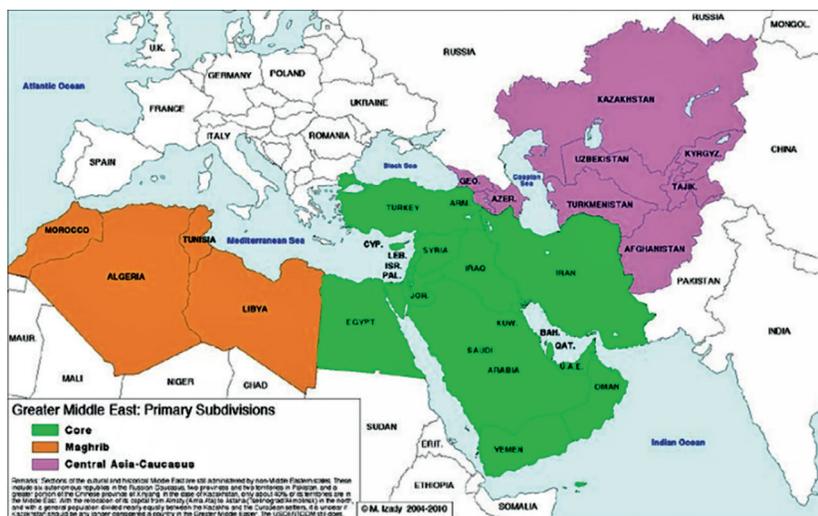


Figure no 5: Greater Middle East

(Source: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/3a/13/56/3a13560b14c78127236c1c6651540e02.jpg>, retrieved on 15.08.2021).

Geopolitically, the Middle East is a buffer zone located at the confluence of six religions and civilisations: Sunni Islam and Shi’a Islam, Mosaicism, Christianity, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Animism. Its borders, disputed and almost always “bloodied”, correspond to the description of the Islamic civilisational space made by Samuel P. Huntington (1927-2008). This inter-civilisational buffer, currently predominantly Islamic, is considered to be the “cradle” of the humanity and one of the areas of centrality on which the macro-balance of the Afro-Eurasian continental mass depends.

Geostrategically, the Middle East belongs, together with the Maghreb, to the compression zone with pivot status between two large global spaces, maritime and continental (see the map in figure no. 6). A pivotal status that, when controlled by any of the competitors (a matter possible only by unifying the Middle East under a single authority), transforms the Middle East into a “gateway”, a transit corridor between the macro-components of the continental mass, with exceptional strategic value for any dominant power. When control of this global pivot is disputed between the two spaces, subsequent geopolitical dynamics predispose it to instability, conflict, fragmentation, state failure, poverty, and underdevelopment, and turn it into a “shatterbelt”.



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An area that holds in its subsoil 38.4% of the world's known natural gas reserves (in 2018) (NS Energy, 2019) and 48.3% of the total proven oil reserves on the planet (in 2020) (BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 2021).

*The compression zone of the Middle East has been the subject of concern for American, Russian, Chinese and other strategists. For centuries under the Ottoman rule, during the decline of the Empire, the area began to be disputed between the British and French metropolises, the increasingly incisive Tsarist Empire and the new emerging European powers of the late 19th century: the Italian Kingdom and the German Empire.*



Figure no. 6: Middle East and North Africa

(Source: <https://i2.wp.com/www.timpromanescu.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/orientul-mijlociu.jpg?fit=653%2C426&ssl=1>, retrieved on 15.08.2021).

Therefore, not coincidentally, the compression zone of the Middle East has been the subject of concern for American, Russian, Chinese and other strategists. For centuries under the Ottoman rule, during the decline of the Empire, the area began to be disputed between the British and French metropolises, the increasingly incisive Tsarist Empire and the new emerging European powers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: the Italian Kingdom and the German Empire. The race for the domination of the Orient accelerated with the Second Industrial Revolution and the introduction of hydrocarbons into the global energy equation. This issue motivated the outbreak of the First World War (1914-1918) followed by the dismantling of the last remaining territories in the Ottoman Empire (1920-1923). In this troubled historical context, Afghanistan became a much-needed “buffer” between the Tsarist Empire and later the Soviet one, and the British Indies, a geopolitical status under which it gained independence on 19 August 1919.

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Since then, the Middle East has been at the forefront of geopolitical competition between major global geostrategic players, eventually turning into a shatterbelt. Largely stabilised at its current borders after the 1960s (with the exception of Sudan, which underwent a fragmentation process in 2011), the Middle East continues to be the subject of strategic plans to resettle ethnic borders, officially, for the purpose of creating fairer borders and, unofficially, for an easier domination of the region. In this respect, on 1 June 2006, US Lt Col (ret.) Ralph Peters published in the *“Armed Forces Journal”* the article entitled *Blood Borders: How a Better Middle East Would Look*, in which he suggested a new division of this geopolitical area, as it can be seen in the map in figure no. 7.

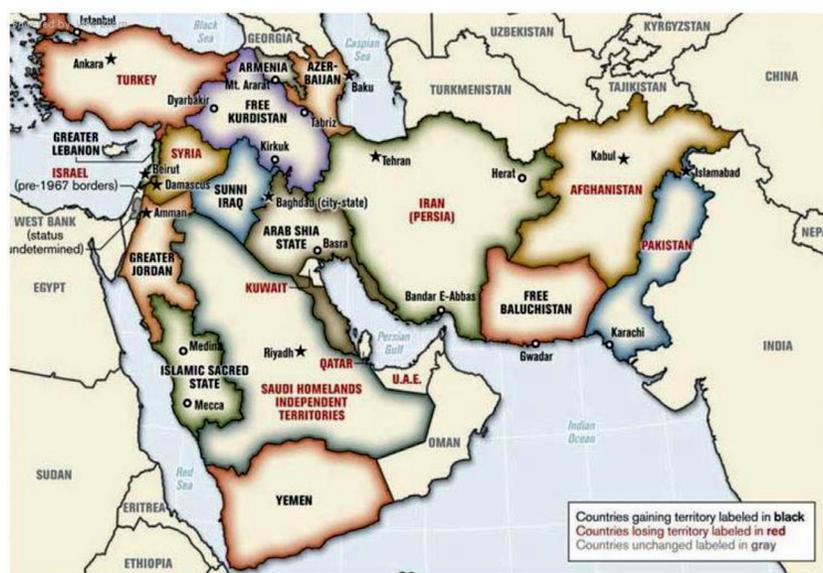


Figure no. 7: The New Middle East

(Source: <https://resboiu.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/harta-ciudatelor-modificari.png>, retrieved on 15.08.2021).

In the *New Middle East* suggested by Peters, Afghanistan would be reduced to Pashtun-populated territory, so that its Western provinces, in the Herat area, populated by other ethnic groups (Turkmen, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Aimaqi) would be included into a Greater Iran, while its Eastern border would move across the Durand Line encompassing the Pashtun territories now under Pakistani sovereignty. Thus, Pakistan would also lose the provinces South of Afghanistan inhabited by Baluchis and transformed into the independent state of Baluchistan.

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The American geostrategist and statesman Zbigniew K. Brzeziński (1928-2017) included the Middle East and, implicitly, Afghanistan, in the “World Balkans”, “an area stretching from the Suez to Xinjiang, an angry and volatile region, resentful of foreign domination, extremely rich in hydrocarbons and gold, at the intersection of the corridors linking Western Europe to East Asia and a geopolitical prize for any power capable of dominating it”.

Less radical in his suggestions, compared to Peters, the American geostrategist and statesman Zbigniew K. Brzeziński (1928-2017) included the Middle East and, implicitly, Afghanistan, in the “World Balkans”, “an area stretching from the Suez to Xinjiang, an angry and volatile region, resentful of foreign domination, extremely rich in hydrocarbons and gold, at the intersection of the corridors linking Western Europe to East Asia and a geopolitical prize for any power capable of dominating it” (Brzeziński, 1997, pp. 123-124). Moreover, Brzeziński drew the attention of US policymakers that preventing at all costs the unification of this region under one of the regional powers (Russia, Turkey, Iran, China) is one of the American geostrategic imperatives in Eurasia (see the map in figure no. 8).

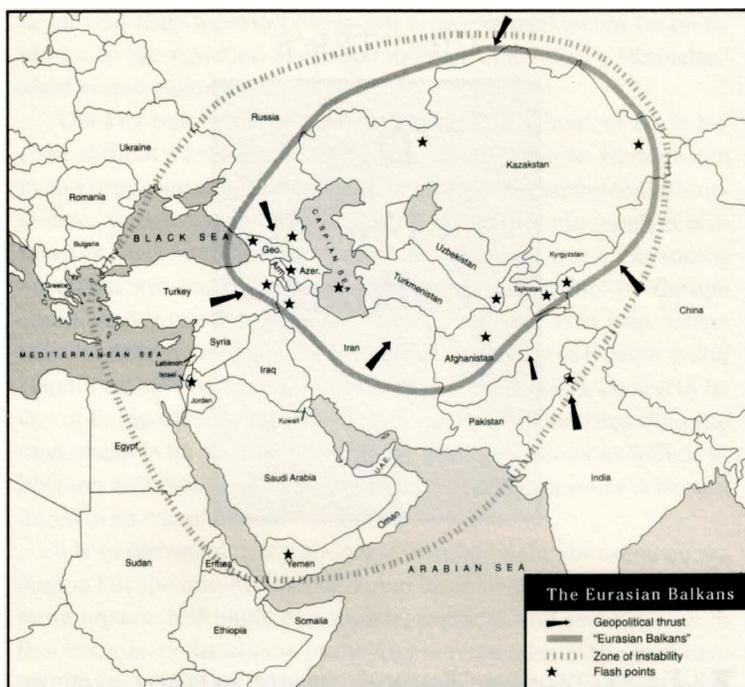


Figure no. 8: The “World Balkans”  
 (Source: [http://orientalreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/EB\\_map.jpg](http://orientalreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/EB_map.jpg),  
 retrieved on 16.08.2021).

A global pivot, as the “World Balkans” were described by another geopolitician, the Frenchman Xavier Martin, with a huge geoeconomic and geostrategic value, located at the intersection of land roads connecting Russia with Africa and South Asia, China with Europe and Africa, and Europe with Asia.

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Figure no. 9: TAPI gas pipeline project

(Source: [http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-ORStthAe7us/UD0IB1S8OqI/AAAAAAAAARU/akwMfh0gA4s/s1600/Tapi\\_Map\\_01.gif](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-ORStthAe7us/UD0IB1S8OqI/AAAAAAAAARU/akwMfh0gA4s/s1600/Tapi_Map_01.gif), retrieved on 15.08.2021).

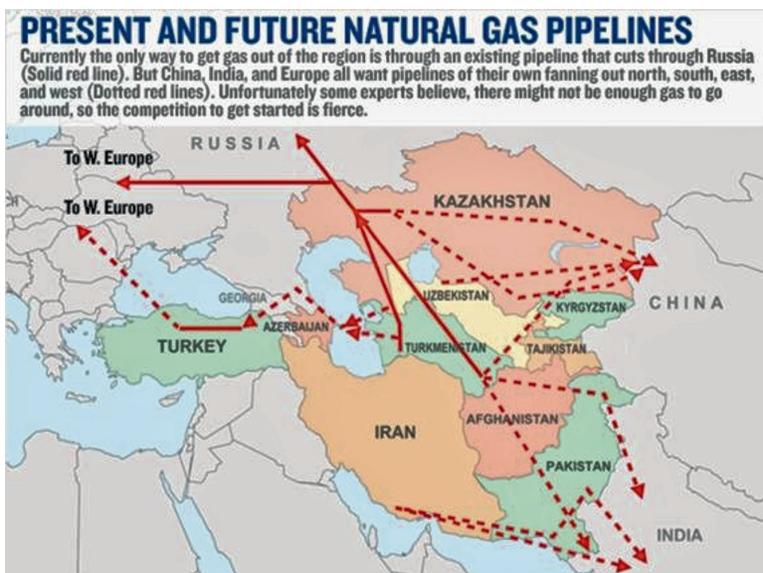


Figure no. 10: Energy corridors through the “World Balkans”

(Source: [https://stevehynd.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/gas\\_image004.jpg](https://stevehynd.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/gas_image004.jpg), retrieved on 15.08.2021).



The projects of energy and transport corridors, which cross the “World Balkans” and implicitly Afghanistan support the mentioned idea. Examples in this regard are the *TAPI gas pipeline* (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India), which would have brought Turkmen and Afghan gas into the Pakistani and Indian pipelines (see the maps in *figures no. 9 and no. 10*) or the inclusion of Afghanistan in the Chinese strategic and geoeconomic project of the “*Silk Road*” (see the map in *figure no.11*). Projects at which the administration of the fugitive Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had acquiesced, with Afghanistan becoming the “*heart of the Silk Road in Asia*” (Haidari).

*From the perspective of the Russian Federation, Afghanistan, as a component of the intermediate security ring of pivotal power, is and must remain a buffer state. An area targeted by Moscow’s domination interests, materialised in the Soviet period by the invasion of this country in 1979.*



Figure no. 11: (*Silk*) Belt and Road Initiative map  
 (Source: [https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/proxy/GNXp0cKHmgsPtgWD09p4iUQgt\\_fx\\_0tbnBFvH\\_gTc6qXb8YZkR9EAca9fQ43qDpbfdEUXMZM3n4AONhpUaCLa27wrHzDeyONDcZwjvdNYjsBg](https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/proxy/GNXp0cKHmgsPtgWD09p4iUQgt_fx_0tbnBFvH_gTc6qXb8YZkR9EAca9fQ43qDpbfdEUXMZM3n4AONhpUaCLa27wrHzDeyONDcZwjvdNYjsBg), retrieved on 15.08.2021).

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Figure no. 12: South Asian security complex  
 (Source: <https://www.matrixmag.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CSF989.jpg>,  
 retrieved on 16.08.2021).



*Afghanistan is: from a geopolitical point of view, a buffer zone, which kept the Russian pivotal power away from India and the Indian Ocean; from a geostrategic point of view, a bridgehead for any non-Asian power interested in projecting its strength in the immediate vicinity of the main Asian geostrategic players: China, India, Iran, Pakistan and the Russian Federation.*

And, last but not least, Afghanistan is considered by Iran as belonging, *de facto*, to its own sphere of influence, a potential region of a Greater Iran, by virtue of the former borders of the late Persian Empire, as it can be seen in the map in *figure no. 13*. And in the immediate vicinity of Afghanistan there are: Kashmir, a disputed region between India and Pakistan, which could, in turn, be attracted in the regional geopolitical dynamics, leading to the heating of the conflict between the two nuclear powers of South Asia; the Chinese province of Xinjiang, former East Turkestan, where the Uighurs live. In Xinjiang have expanded over time both the moderate, Hanafi Chinese Yihewani Muslim Brotherhood, founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the ultra-conservative, Hanabilah Ikhwan, the local branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Popescu).

Therefore, we can conclude that Afghanistan is:

- from a geopolitical point of view, a buffer zone, which kept the Russian pivotal power away from India and the Indian Ocean;
- from a geostrategic point of view, a bridgehead for any non-Asian power interested in projecting its strength in the immediate vicinity of the main Asian geostrategic players: China, India, Iran, Pakistan and the Russian Federation;



*Its relief is rugged mountainous, which allows its transformation into an impregnable natural fortress, with conventional weapons, and, very importantly, in its subsoil there are important mineral and energy resources.*

Figure no. 13: Greater Iran/Persia

Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/45/Greater\\_Iran\\_Map.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/45/Greater_Iran_Map.png), retrieved on 16.08.2021).

- geoeconomically, a hub and a nexus of the corridors linking Central Asia and the Caucasus to South Asia.

Geopolitically, it belongs to the compression belt of the Middle East and the Greater Middle East, being subjected to geopolitical pressures generated by the competition for domination of this space. It is included in one of the most active geopolitical fault lines, the global pivot, also known as the “World Balkans”, made up of the states of Central Asia, South Asia and the Caucasus. It is located inside the internal, vital, security ring of the Russian Federation, in the immediate vicinity of China and the interethnic and religious conflicts in Kashmir and former East Turkestan. This exceptional strategic position is all the more valuable as its relief is rugged mountainous, which allows its transformation into an impregnable natural fortress, with conventional weapons, and, very importantly, in its subsoil there are important mineral and energy resources. In addition, the Amu Darya basin provides river access from Afghan ports to the Caspian Sea and Lake Aral.

## THEREFORE, WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL GEOPOLITICAL IMPACT OF THE RE-TALIBANIZATION OF AFGHANISTAN?

From the data presented above it is hard to believe that the American withdrawal from Afghanistan was due to a military defeat in front of poorly armed groups, without access to military high technologies, made up of semi-nomads, though some of them were trained by the CIA, in the years leading up to the 11 September 2001 attacks. Semi-nomads that waged a long guerrilla war, favoured by the rugged mountainous terrain and the neighbourhoods hostile towards America. The geopolitical value of this area and the bridgehead settled by the Americans in “*the rib*” of Russia and China were far too important to imagine that such a military superpower, which holds technological supremacy and develops new categories of forces for new theatres of operations, spatial and cybernetic, was defeated by a band of pseudo-soldiers, even “*fighters of Allah*”. The reasons of this withdrawal are in the need to reset the global and regional game in the context of the security challenges facing America, both domestically and internationally, especially on the axes with China, Russia, Israel/Iran and Europe. A withdrawal announced long before, in 2013 (Petersen).

China’s global power ambitions, translated into the military research programmes, the spatial programme, the Belt and Road Strategy for the economic conquest of the Afro-Eurasian continental mass, the naval domination of the Southern hemisphere’s Aquatic mass through the “*string of pearls*” of the Chinese naval bases, the strategy of taking control of the global maritime straits and chokepoints, have pointed out, for sure, both to the Americans and the Russians, that China wants to transform itself into a:

- *naval superpower*, by developing the military fleet and naval bases to ensure its ability to project its force over the Planetary Ocean;
- *continental superpower*, by controlling the shores of Eurasia, which will lead to the containment of the Russian pivotal power;
- *spatial superpower*;
- *commercial superpower*, by controlling the maritime traffic through the straits and through the maritime chokepoints;
- *technological superpower*, through research centres developed in the coastal area of Mainland China;



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*China’s global power ambitions are translated into the military research programmes, the spatial programme, the Belt and Road Strategy for the economic conquest of the Afro-Eurasian continental mass, the naval domination of the Southern hemisphere’s Aquatic mass through the “string of pearls” of the Chinese naval bases, the strategy of taking control of the global maritime straits and chokepoints.*



*China was behind the TAPI pipeline construction project, and sought to take economic and political control of the state by investing in wells and refineries in the highly oil-rich basin of the Amu Darya, by acquiring a few mines, by investing in the local mobile phone network, by building a thermal power plant.*

- *institutional superpower*, through the political influence exerted in the UN bodies and in other international institutions and organisations.

These valences of power are added to the already existing Chinese demographic power, its economic and financial power, the richness of strategic ores – the raw materials of today’s industrial revolutions – and, most importantly, the national will of the Chinese people to wash away the shame of a *“century of humiliation”*. Or, in other words, to carry out the objectives of the Great Strategy of *“China’s Dream”* to transform the great Asian power into the hegemon of this world (Popescu). Strategic objectives for which the Chinese state spares no effort and is not influenced by any ideological slogan. With one exception – that of international partners’ compliance with the *“one China”* geopolitical status. Or, in other words, to agree to cut international relations with Taiwan. This Chinese pragmatism has been extremely useful in Beijing’s relationship with states that once have been blacklisted as *“rogue states”* by the US administrations, including the Ayatollah regime in Iran or the regime of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan (Wilson Center, 2011). Therefore, not coincidentally, the first state to recognise the Taliban state in August 2021 was China (Shah, Lahiri, 2021).

China had managed to attract the regime of the fugitive President Ghani, who was negotiating Afghanistan’s role as the *“heart of the Silk Road”*, a euphemism for its status of hub and nexus for Chinese geopolitical, geoeconomic and geostrategic interests. A status for a country where the Americans spent billions to rebuild and stabilise after the 2001 War. In addition, China was behind the TAPI pipeline construction project (Petersen), and sought to take economic and political control of the state by investing in wells and refineries in the highly oil-rich basin of the Amu Darya, by acquiring a few mines, by investing in the local mobile phone network, by building a thermal power plant, and so on (ib.). Inclusive in this *“key”* should be understood the *“withdrawal negotiations”* initiated by the former US administration of President Donald Trump with the Taliban (BBC, 2020), with signal value for the fugitive president, as well as the statement of former Head of the CIA, General David Petraeus, that the Americans did not properly assess the level of corruption that could grind the Afghan society (NPR, 2021).



In addition, China was unhindered in implementing its “*Silk Road*” geoeconomic and geopolitical mega-project, taking advantage of the regional stability provided by the US money and US military presence. In parallel, it developed a close strategic partnership with Pakistan, where it built the naval base for docking nuclear submarines in the deep-sea strategic port of Gwadar. Moreover, China has developed the already existing partnership with Iran, the two states being also founders of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a financial body enslaved to the Chinese geoeconomic megaproject of the “*Silk Belt and Road*” (AIIB, 2021).

However, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan detonated all the calculations related to the stability of the region. Moreover, the unexpected “*victory*” of the Taliban – who managed to take control of a large territory of the country in only 10 days, by the capitulation or the retreat of the Afghan military – has brought chaos, the mass refuge of Westernised Afghans and a lot of televised emotion. Emotion generated by the despair of the Westernised urban Afghan population (in minority relative to the large mass of the population), which was abandoned and doomed to a tragic end. A horrendous end of life that will be applied by Hanabilah fanatics to the so-called heretics that allowed themselves to abandon Salafist dogma. Shortly after the Taliban stormed the presidential palace in Kabul, in the mass-media began to circulate the calls for resistance from Ahmad Massoud, who was located in the Panjshir Valley, a territory in Central-Northern Afghanistan, 150 kilometres North of Kabul, near the Hindu Kush Mountain range, that remained unoccupied by the Taliban. Massoud has been joined by former Afghan Vice President, Amrulla Saleh, and by former Defence Minister, Bismillah Khan Mohammadi (The Week, 2021). Massoud is the son of former Mujahideen guerrilla commander Ahmad Shah Massoud (1953-2001) (Coll, 2021), who was killed by the Taliban before the 9/11 attacks and who was known for his links with the CIA (Ib.). At this moment, at least three probable scenarios are outlined.

*Public emotion will ensure and legitimise support for anti-Taliban forces, this time internationally. In the first instance, China, which has rushed to recognise the Taliban, will receive a portion of public disgrace, especially if the Taliban begin punishing Westernised apostates.*

### **THE FIRST SCENARIO, POTENTIALLY CARRIED OUT IN THE SHORT AND MEDIUM TERM**

We are witnessing a possible repetition of the 1979 scenario, from the period immediately following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, this time in the format of an internationalised civil war. Public emotion will ensure and legitimise support for anti-Taliban forces, this time



*It is very possible that the Muslim Brotherhood will mobilise its network and activate its Special Apparatus in support of the Taliban "brothers". A very strong, global network that brings together Turkey, Qatar, Iran, Pakistan, the Palestinians and so on. A network that can reactivate globally dispersed terrorist cells that have been apparently "dormant" during the pandemic.*

internationally. In the first instance, China, which has rushed to recognise the Taliban, will receive a portion of public disgrace, especially if the Taliban begin punishing Westernised apostates. Russia will most likely choose the path of neutrality, preferring to turn into a transmission belt between the conflicting parties. And the other regional players, with connections to the Muslim Brotherhood as well as to China – such as Pakistan, to Russia and secondarily to the Muslim Brotherhood and China – such as Iran, or only to Russia and secondarily China – such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, will be targeted not only by the masses of Afghan refugees, but also by the risks of an open internationalised conflict at the borders. Europeans, though highly critical of the way the Americans have handled the withdrawal from Afghanistan, will probably prefer not to recognise the Taliban regime (Cook, Grieshaber, 2021) and to financially support refugee-targeted states.

Subsequently, it is very possible that the Muslim Brotherhood will mobilise its network and activate its *Special Apparatus* in support of the Taliban "brothers". A very strong, global network that brings together Turkey, Qatar, Iran, Pakistan, the Palestinians and so on (Popescu). A network that can reactivate globally dispersed terrorist cells that have been apparently "dormant" during the pandemic. Therefore, it is possible to witness the outbreak of a fifth wave of Islamist terrorism, which can act either by the classic means of self-detonation and knife killings, or by burning forests, by using dirty bombs or vectors of biological warfare disseminated by drones etc. However, it is possible to witness a fractionalisation of the network, as there are also former or descendants of former Mujahideen on the side of the anti-Taliban resistance. As well as in the management of the network there are agents of different geostrategic players active globally.

On the other hand, Afghan anti-Taliban resistance will benefit from the support of those who do not want a neighbouring Hanabilah emirate, such as the Russian Federation, which has publicly stated it (TOLONews, 2021), and India, which has 160 million Muslims, many educated in Deobandi seminars, and a frozen conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir sovereignty (Simina, 2016). Moreover, the support of those who do not want the Chinese hegemonic megaproject in Eurasia to materialise such as: the Russians, who understand that the Great Chinese Strategy ends up by the containment of the Russian Federation;

the Indians, who feel threatened by the Chinese economic and military presence in the Indian Ocean; and obviously, the Americans, who understand that China's hegemonic rise is a reality. They are joined by other players who do not want the Muslim Brotherhood to build a Caliphate in Afghanistan and to settle down an Islamist "belt" that will start in Qatar, Gaza and the Palestinian territories, going in Lebanon and then in Turkey, to reach Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Popescu). An Islamist belt that would blow up the already fragile balances of the Middle East and endanger Russia's internal security ring in Central Asia, also called "its soft belly". Russia, India, Israel, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the Maldives etc. are also included here. And, it would not be out of the question that other Asian allies of the Americans may come into the play, interested in dispersing China's attention from its targets in the Pacific region. On the other hand, the Taliban's response is expected to be sustained, given that by the capitulation of the Afghan military units, Islamists have taken possession of their weapons and ammunition (France 24, 2021).

Such an internationalised conflict on China's border, in the immediate vicinity of the Uighur region of former East Turkestan, may lead the oppressed Uighur population to revolt against Beijing's Communist dictatorship. Pakistan, in turn, could face a new episode of insurgency of the Baluchi people, driven by secessionist ideas (Gatani, 2021), and/or the Sindh people, also driven by the "seeds" of Sindhudesh separatism (Khan, 2020), and/or the people of Gilgit-Baltistan province where there is a movement that militates for the independence of Balawaristan (Bolda, 2014), a situation that would create a corridor of instability that could stretch from the Amu Darya basin to the Gulf of Oman. And, a reheating of the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir would raise the issue of a confrontation between two nuclear powers.

Destabilising processes can also affect Iran, where there are separatist groups, but the likelihood of success is lower, given the strong Russian support for Tehran's theocrats. Similarly, instability could lead to the Fergana Valley, which stretches across Eastern Uzbekistan, Southern Kyrgyzstan and Northern Tajikistan, where ethnic conflicts and Islamist movements have a history since the Soviet era. But given the exceptional strategic value of the Central Asian states for the security of the Russian Federation, instability is less likely to turn into a major conflict.



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*Pakistan, in turn, could face a new episode of insurgency of the Baluchi people, driven by secessionist ideas, and/or the Sindh people, also driven by the "seeds" of Sindhudesh separatism, and/or the people of Gilgit-Baltistan province where there is a movement that militates for the independence of Balawaristan, a situation that would create a corridor of instability that could stretch from the Amu Darya basin to the Gulf of Oman.*



*The US withdrawal from Afghanistan can seriously destabilise the security situation in the "World Balkans", involving regional and extra-regional players in a potential civil conflict, confirming Iqbal's words in the motto of this article that Afghanistan is the "heart" of Asia, and that from its discord, the discord of Asia is born, and, conversely, from its concord, the concord of Asia is born.*

With a fragmented South Asia, with the "World Balkans" threatened by instability and ongoing conflicts, neither the unification of the Eurasian coast (the Rimland) under the domination of a single regional power (China) nor the hegemonic mega-projects of pan-continental (Chinese) economic "bridges" can materialise with the same success as before. The same strategy that the Russian Federation applied in the former rebel Soviet states, riparian to the Black Sea. And, with a major outbreak of instability at its own border, in the immediate vicinity of an own region where Islamist insurgency is very possible, it is hard to believe that China's aggressive intentions toward Taiwan and its domineering behaviour toward the other states in the South China Sea will materialise just as easily.

Here is how the US withdrawal from Afghanistan can seriously destabilise the security situation in the "World Balkans", involving regional and extra-regional players in a potential civil conflict, confirming Iqbal's words in the motto of this article that Afghanistan is the "heart" of Asia, and that from its discord, the discord of Asia is born, and, conversely, from its concord, the concord of Asia is born.

In addition, the withdrawal of the USA and its NATO allies from Afghanistan reduces costs for Western taxpayers, a matter that supports budgets severely affected by the Covid 19 pandemic. And, last but not least, America puts an end to small wars to prepare for the potential hegemonic war that could break out at some point and to restore its financial balance, severely destabilised by the costs of attrition wars, turning geopolitical areas, whose regional balance is vital for its strategic competitors, into stakes of competition and geopolitical domination.

And the Europeans will receive more and more refugees, under the conditions of the economic crisis generated by the pandemic with the Chinese flu virus, a matter that will contribute to further weakening the European construction and fuelling the Europhobic discourse. A potential situation valid for all the three scenarios.

### **THE SECOND SCENARIO, CARRIED OUT IN THE SHORT AND MEDIUM TERM**

The Afghan resistance announced by the group gathered around Massoud fails. The Taliban take over the entire power and establish an ultra-conservative regime. They proclaim the Salafi Emirate, supported by the huge network of the Muslim Brotherhood, which will turn Afghanistan into a safe haven for its Secret Apparatus.

The “Islamist belt” of the Middle East becomes functional, with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Qatar and the Palestinian Territories as vectors. Pursuing the materialisation of the central objectives of the Muslim Brotherhood – the building of the Global Caliphate with its capital in Jerusalem – but also partisan interests in the power game within the Islamic area, the Hamas, the Taliban, Hezbollah, Pakistani Islamists, possibly joined by former and current fighters from DAESH, Al Qa’ida, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Houthi militias, African and Central Asian Islamists, Sri Lankan and Indonesian Islamists etc., could build a common front against Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other monarchies from the Gulf region. An issue that could greatly destabilise not only the “World Balkans” but also the entire Middle East and even states in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. As in the previous scenario, a fifth wave of Islamist terrorism is likely to break out, and it is not out of the question to witness even a second “Arab Spring” that will wreak havoc on states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and others.

It is likely that the Taliban regime will only be recognised by the states connected to the Muslim Brotherhood and by China (possibly Russia). China’s political support for the Taliban will generate public image costs for the Asian state, in the context of the chaos and the televised despair of the Westernised Afghan population after “the fall” of Kabul. Image already “wrinkled” by less and less veiled allegations about the laboratory origin of the SARS-COV 2 virus, of which China might be no stranger (BBC, 2021). Russia, worried about the resurgence of Hanabilah Islamism in the immediate vicinity of its Central Asian “soft belly”, will seek to strengthen its military presence in the region and its alliances with states interested in the containment of the Islamists. Russian-Chinese relations are likely to strain as a result of the Chinese-Taliban and Muslim Brotherhood ties, and mutual suspicions about underground games might become increasingly intense. Tensions could affect the Russian-Chinese binomial, which acts in areas of great geostrategic value to Russia, such as the North-South East-European Corridor or the Caucasus. Russian-American relations could be further improved, given that China’s hegemonic ambitions are disturbing both great powers. And, Beijing’s support for the Taliban Islamism, by recognising their regime and, implicitly, the Emirate, is affecting Russia’s security interests. A Russian state that must also manage an advanced Chinese economic and political presence in the Arctic,



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*There may be a possibility for the Chinese state to engage militarily in Afghanistan as a result of the export of Islamist insurgency to the Xinjiang region. This is an unlikely, but not impossible, scenario, given the risks of such a decision for China.*

part of the strategic plan of the “Polar Silk Road”. The “Islamist belt” will also disturb India, which not only has a frozen conflict with Pakistan, but also has a wide border with it. This could lead to the creation of a system of regional and extra-regional alliances to counter the Islamist emergence, along with the Chinese emergence, alliances that could bring together Russia, India, the USA and the United Kingdom, the Europeans, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the other aligned states of the Gulf Region, as well as states of Southeast Asia. In such a security environment, the risk of fragmentation of the Rimland increases exponentially and it is hard to believe that the “Silk Belt and Road” mega-project can be continued with the same success as before. It is also hard to believe (but not impossible) that the Chinese state will allow itself to open a front in the Pacific, as long as there is a major outbreak of instability on its Eastern border.

As it can be seen, in both cases the final strategic result is the same: delaying the materialisation of the “Silk Belt and Road”; preventing the coagulation of the coastal land of Eurasia under a regional hegemony (China); creating a hotbed of instability and of radical ultra-conservative Islamism on the Chinese border in the immediate vicinity of the Uighur-occupied region; dissipating China’s attention from the strategic situation in the Pacific; emergence of a major outbreak of instability in the immediate vicinity of the Russian Federation’s vital, internal, security ring; inevitable tension in Russian-Chinese relations through divergent interests towards the Taliban Emirate; interference of India, directly threatened by a potential export of insurgency among Deobandi Muslims from its national territory. An Asian trilateral directly targeted by the outbreak of ultra-conservative Islamism, which has become active shortly after the Taliban took power.

### **THE THIRD SCENARIO, IN THE MEDIUM TERM**

And, there may be a possibility for the Chinese state to engage militarily in Afghanistan as a result of the export of Islamist insurgency to the Xinjiang region. This is an unlikely, but not impossible, scenario, given the risks of such a decision for China. Not so much from the point of view of the military management of Afghanistan, where the Chinese military could be much more efficient than the Russian and American predecessors, due to the native, Confucianist discipline, and the austerity of the lifestyle, to the huge number of soldiers

who could also be mobilised, the economic and technological force that could ensure the logistics of such an approach, but, especially, from the point of view of being involved in a war with the Global Islamist Network, considering the risk of such conflict internationalisation, on the model of the 1979 War, in the context in which China is already in a fiercer competition with the USA. In addition, Russia would have no reason to want a Chinese-dominated Afghanistan, transformed into an impregnable fortress, in the immediate vicinity of its Central Asian “soft belly” – directly targeted by the Chinese strategic plans. Nor would India be very comfortable with an Afghan-Pakistani bloc dominated by China on its border.

Obviously, even in this case, China’s strategic plans in Eurasia will no longer have the same dynamics.

All of these scenarios, and others that are less plausible, because they involve unforeseen “black swan” events, serve some of the American strategic imperatives in Eurasia:

- preventing the unification of the coastal zone of the continental mass (Rimland) under a unitary regional leadership;
- preventing the unification of the “Western Balkans” under a regional power;
- preventing the establishment of the Russian-Chinese geopolitical bloc.

A cynical *realpolitik* exercise demonstrating that idealism in international relations is just a utopia.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Of course, the question arises as to why the Biden Administration ordered the withdrawal of the US military in such a hurry, severely damaging his country’s image, through similarities to the evacuation of Saigon at the end of the lost War in Vietnam, on 30 April 1975, and disregarding the fact that, at that time, more than 11,000 Americans and many other citizens of the partner states were still in Afghanistan?

One explanation could be related to the need to move troops urgently to other theatres. Another one could be related to a huge mistake, induced or not induced to the current president, which could cost him his chair, given that he is suspected of not being in perfect health. A change that would bring the current Vice President, Kamala Harris, to the White House, along with her own political entourage,



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*All of these scenarios, and others that are less plausible, because they involve unforeseen “black swan” events, serve some of the American strategic imperatives in Eurasia: preventing the unification of the coastal zone of the continental mass (Rimland) under a unitary regional leadership; preventing the unification of the “Western Balkans” under a regional power; preventing the establishment of the Russian-Chinese geopolitical bloc.*



*The idea of cultural globalisation through economic globalisation and consumerism is a utopia.*

*It is absolutely necessary to have a deep understanding and acceptance of the culture and civilisation of the target state.*

different from that of President Biden. A change that would propel Kamala Harris to the forefront of the upcoming US presidential election, to the detriment of the ambitions of former First Ladies, Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton. A pretty likely option, if we look at the huge propaganda machine which went against Joe Biden. And, a last option, which does not exclude the other two, would be that we are witnessing a well-thought-out and implemented scenario, a well-controlled public chaos and emotion, to reset both the American internal game and the external one, the global political game, at a time when the costs of the US military presence in Afghanistan outweighed the strategic and economic benefits.

Another question is how much this *realpolitik* exercise will cost America. How hard will it be for the US Government to erase the image of a defeated state by a gang of pseudo-nomads armed with AKMs, image generated by the staging of the helicopter evacuation of American personnel from Kabul? And how much will this decision weigh on America's future partnership with the rest of the world? If we were to follow the Russian, Chinese and a certain part of the American and European press, it will weigh heavily. If we understand that no alliance is eternal, only the national interest and geography being eternal, then we would avoid falling prey to emotions, remaining confined to the sphere of cold analysis and drawing the appropriate conclusions. Even if they do not make us feel comfortable.

And, last but not least, the military and political experiences of the Allies in Afghanistan have reiterated some well-known conclusions from the history, even recent, of humanity:

- the export of democracy and Western civilisational models to other civilisational spaces is counterproductive and illusory;
- the idea of cultural globalisation through economic globalisation and consumerism is a utopia;
- the idea of a new non-Westphalian Western world order, which would replace both the Westphalian world order accepted by all civilisational spaces and the own, traditional, orders of those spaces, is also a utopia;
- it is absolutely necessary to have a deep understanding and acceptance of the culture and civilisation of the target state;
- in the absence of a vital motivation, related to own state survival, any war of attrition, waged at a great distance



- from own borders and for reasons understood by very few, ends in a withdrawal, equivalent to a defeat, of the external military forces engaged in the field, in the absence of effective post-conflict stabilisation mechanisms;
- in the absence of an unconditional surrender of the enemy, no victory can be total;
  - the mountainous terrain and, especially the high, rugged mountain ranges, facilitate the guerrilla war, a war in front of which the conventional combat tactics are not effective;
  - in a hostile civilisational space, the wars that are initiated must be of the proxy type;
  - economic and political interference in military decision-making is devastating;
  - the high quality of the information is the result of the activity of a whole chain of professionals, who do not have to be dependent on some ideologies and politically correct slogans;
  - it is impossible to turn a militarily occupied nation/population into a real ally.

*Economic  
and political  
interference  
in military  
decision-making  
is devastating.*

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### **Brief Data on Statistical and Social Demography**

According to the *CIA WorldFactBook*, in July 2021, the total population of Afghanistan was 37,466,414. The distribution of the population is uneven, being concentrated mainly in the valleys of the mountainous areas and in the plains of the North and South. The age pyramid is a broad-based one, specific to poor and underdeveloped countries with high birth rates and low life expectancy at birth, 40.62% of the population being made up of children aged 0-14 years and just 6% of the population being over 55. In July 2021, Afghanistan recorded the highest infant mortality rate in the world, at 106.75 deaths per 1,000 live births, indicating an extremely low level of civilisation and education of mothers and of the development of healthcare networks and sanitation. In fact, the density of doctors in 2016 was 0.28 per 1,000 inhabitants and the density of hospital blankets was 0.4 per 1,000 inhabitants. Life expectancy at birth in July 2021 was 53.25 years (51.73 years for men, 54.85 years for women).

The 2004 Constitution, still in force at the time of writing, recognises 14 ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Baluchi, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq and Pashai. The official languages are Afghan Persian or Dari, spoken by 78% of the population, and Pashto, spoken by 50% of Afghans. Afghans are 99.7% Muslim (84.7-89.7% Sunnis, 10-15% Shiites). The favourite residence environment is the rural one, only 26.3% of the population being urbanised. In July 2018, only 43% of the population over the age of 15 was literate (55.5% of men and 29.8% of women).

### **Brief Political-Administrative Data**

At the time of writing, on 16 August 2021, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is a presidential republic with its capital in Kabul. It consists of 34 provinces: Badakhshan, Badghis, Baghlan, Balkh, Bamyan, Daykundi, Farah, Faryab, Ghazni, Ghor, Helmand, Herat, Jowzjan, Kabul,



Kandahar, Kapisa, Khost, Kunar, Kunduz, Laghman, Logar, Nangarhar, Nimroz, Nuristan, Paktika, Paktiya, Panjshir, Parwan, Samangan, Sar-e Pul, Takhar, Uruzgan, Wardak, Zabul. The Constitution, still in force, was ratified on 26 January 2004. The legal system is mixed, secular and Islamic. National Day celebrates independence from British rule on 19 August 1919 (CIA WorldFactBook, 2021).

### Brief Economic Data

According to the *CIA WorldFactBook*, in 2019, Afghanistan was one of the poorest countries in the world, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) of only US \$ 78.557 billion and a GDP per capita of 2,065 USD. In 2016, 54.5% of the Afghan population lived below the subsistence threshold of 1.5 USD/capita/day and 23.9% of Afghans did not have a job. In 2016, Afghanistan's main export products, totalling \$ 784 million, were gold, sandstone, scrap metal, grapes, opium, fruits and nuts, insect resins, cotton, hand-woven rugs. The main export partners were the United Arab Emirates 45%, Pakistan 24%, India 22%, China 1%. Also in 2016, the main import products, totalling USD 7.616 billion were wheat flour, radio broadcasting equipment, refined oil, rolled tobacco, aircraft parts, synthetic fabrics. The main import partners were the United Arab Emirates 23% , Pakistan 17%, India 13%. As it can be seen, the state's trade balance is intensely unbalanced in favour of imports, which further deepens the country's economic stagnation. Unlike the sub-Saharan states, which in turn face poverty and underdevelopment, Afghanistan is 100% electrified in urban areas and 98% in rural areas and access to drinking water is 95.9% in rural areas and 61.4% in rural areas. In 2019, 63.18% of the population owned a mobile phone. Afghanistan has, in addition to the two river ports in the North, 34,903 km of roads, of which 17,903 km are paved, a heliport, 29 airports with paved runways and 17 with unpaved runways, as well as 466 km of gas pipeline.

### Challenges related to the Quality of the Environment

According to the same site, *CIA WorldFactBook*, the main challenges regarding the quality of the environment are represented by the limited volume of natural freshwater resources; inadequate supply of drinking water to the population; soil degradation; overgrazing; deforestation.

