

## Interview

**Zamir Kabulov**

### **LEAVING AFGHANISTAN THE U.S. WANT TO STRENGTHEN THEIR PRESENCE IN ASIA PACIFIC**

*What is the current disposition of forces in Afghanistan? Are there any prospects for a return to normalcy in the country in the wake of the ISAF drawdown, and how will it affect the security situation in Afghanistan and Central Asia? Why is Washington in such a hurry to pull out large troop numbers, while at the same time retaining the military bases in the country? And what are Russia's key interests in the region?*

*Security Index correspondents Vadim Kozyulin and Irina Mironova have put these questions to Zamir Kabulov, Head of the Second Asia Department at the Russian Foreign Ministry, Special Presidential Representative for Afghanistan, and the Russian Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Afghanistan in 2004-2009.*

**SECURITY INDEX:** What is the current political landscape of Afghanistan? What are the most influential forces within the country? What are the most powerful regional groupings? Is there any pan-Afghan political force capable of keeping the situation in the entire country under control with little or no foreign assistance?

**KABULOV:** The Afghan political landscape is actually very similar to the country's geographic landscape. There are mountains, valleys, gorges and gullies – geographic as well as political ones. The Afghan society is split, but this multi-ethnic nation is united by its determination to keep Afghanistan as a united country. Most of the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and other ethnic groups see themselves as Afghans first. Every one of these groups has its own distinctive features, as well as grievances and reasons to be unhappy with the way things are in the country. On the whole, however, they want to live in a united country, with its long and rich heritage. That is why there is no clear answer to the question of which political groups are the most influential. The situation is very fluid.

But the immutable facts on the ground are these: there are four main ethnic-political groups in the country, i.e. the Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Hazaras and the Uzbeks, with their numerous smaller sub-groupings.

**The Pashtuns** are Afghanistan's largest ethnic group. It has several distinct centers of political influence. The two most powerful of them are the government of Afghanistan led by Hamid Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun, and the Taliban, whose members are almost all Pashtuns. These two centers have very different views of the current situation in the country and its political future. The Karzai group wants to build a secular country. The Taliban want a theocracy, or at least a country dominated by Islamists. This aspiration is expressed in slogans such as "The Sharia law is our Constitution", etc. Both of these groups want to rule the country, so they

are fighting each other. The only thing they agree on is that they both want to preserve the political dominance of Pashtuns in Afghanistan.

The second ethnic group is **the Tajiks**. It is also very large, but divided into numerous subgroups. They don't really see themselves as Tajiks. Their language is very close to the Iranian, Persian and Tajik languages. The Afghan Tajiks are very numerous, but they lack a single political center. For a while they did have such a center, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, the head of the Islamic Society of Afghanistan. Rabbani positioned himself as a religious-political leader rather than a politician. He worked closely with the late Ahmad Shah Massoud, a talented field commander who united many ethnic Tajiks. In previous years those various Tajik groupings didn't really see eye to eye; in the years of Jihad and the Soviet military presence they were affiliated with different political groups (let us recall, for example, the seven different Mujahidin parties). The Tajiks clearly want more political power in the country, especially because they used to be the closest political partners of the Pashtuns and were tightly integrated into the Afghan political system.

**The Hazaras** are a Mongoloid, Persian-language group. The vast majority of them are Shia Muslims. They don't have the same level of internal divisions and splits as the Tajiks, but they are not a closely-knit group, either. During the Jihad period and for several years afterwards they were fairly united politically, but there were many internal rivalries as well. One of the main reasons for these divisions within the Hazaras ethnic group is that the Iranians have some influence on their fellow Shia Muslims in Afghanistan. This has caused a split within the Hazara community. Some of the Afghan Hazara leaders recognize the Iranian principle of the rule of the faqih; essentially they recognize that they are accountable to Khomeini, to put it bluntly. Others have refused to do so, arguing that even though they are Shia Muslims, they are also Afghans and must be led by the national interests of their own country rather than take orders from a foreign spiritual leader, albeit a very respected one. The Hazaras – as well as the Tajiks – are united in their desire to see the end of the traditional dominance of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan. Ideally they want an equal role in the running of the country, commensurate to their numbers and economic weight.

The fourth Afghan ethnic group is **the Uzbeks**. Sometimes the country's Turkmen tribes are also held to be part of that group. The Uzbeks live mostly in the north and northwest of Afghanistan. They are also internally divided, mostly for historical reasons. First, numerous Uzbek groups and tribes have always lived in Afghanistan (in the Durrani Empire, which officially began its existence in 1747). After the Russian Empire conquered Central Asia there was no mass exodus of Uzbeks from that region to Afghanistan. There was a lot of cross-border trade between the Bukhara, Kokand and Khorezm khanates. The Uzbeks were heavily involved in that trade, they were a nomadic people, but they mostly kept to the area east of the Amudarya river. After the Soviets crushed the local rebels [in the early 1930s] many Uzbeks fled from Central Asia to Afghanistan, where they settled in several large pockets. The largest group of Uzbeks made their new home in and around the Jowzjan province. An influential group of merchants went to Mazar-i-Sharif, a large trading hub. Others went the Takhar and Kunduz provinces, where they formed Uzbek enclaves. During the anti-Taliban resistance [Abdul Rashid]

Dostum was a widely respected, if not undisputed leader. He had a pretty well organized fighting force, the former 53<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, which the Soviet Union helped to form. It was better armed, organized and trained compared to the forces of the other Uzbek groups. Those groups did not have proper fighting units, they had gangs. Also, the Uzbeks and their field commanders were members of different Mujahidin political parties.

In addition to the four big ethnic groups, there are several others which aren't big enough to be independent political players. They merely align themselves with one of the big four groups, depending on the situation.

I would also like to mention a relatively new phenomenon: all these groups usually have two regional leaders, three at the very most. The most powerful and influential of these regional leaders is Atta Mohammad Nur, the governor of Balkh Province. He aspires to be – and indeed is, to a certain extent – the leader of Afghanistan's northeastern region, which consists of five provinces, including Balkh. The second such regional leader, less powerful but still very influential, is Gul Agha Sherzai, the governor of Nangarhar Province, the capital of which is Jalalabad. The third is the current energy minister, Mohammad Ismail Khan - the very same Capt. Ismail who was one of the first to lead an uprising against Soviet troops in Afghanistan. He killed many Soviet soldiers, by the way. He was a capable field commander, and was formally a member of the Islamic Society of Afghanistan. He spends most of his time in Kabul, serving as a government minister. Previously he was the governor of Herat (from which post he was removed lest he become too powerful).

To summarize, the current politics of Afghanistan is a hodgepodge. There is no single political force powerful enough to resolve all the problems. After more than 30 years of wars, revolutions and a general breakdown of law and order the Afghan society has become very weak. The old structural ties have frayed, the new ones are still crystallizing, and it will take some time before they can play any significant role. These new ties do exist, of course, but they have an ad hoc nature. When some regional problem emerges, the regional ethnic powers start to act. But when a serious problem emerges which concerns the whole nation – well, I cannot say these forces are completely passive, but neither do they play any visible role. Such fragmentation has in some sense helped Karzai, who was installed by the Americans, with the UN Security Council's consent. It was especially useful in the early years; it essentially helped the government to stay afloat. Through its political and other kinds of maneuvering the government has managed to keep Afghanistan as a single country. Unfortunately, after 11 years of American presence the country still does not have an effectively functioning government system. There is still a lot of work to be done to correct numerous mistakes and errors. Some of them are already being corrected, but this will take a lot of time, money and other resources.

**SECURITY INDEX:** Is the role of the central government likely to weaken following the ISAF drawdown?

**KABULOV:** It definitely is. Also, the Americans will need to go to the Security Council once again to get a new mandate. The contingents serving as part of the ISAF, which has a Security Council mandate, are supposed to cease their existence.

We are hearing our partners say this, but so far nobody has tabled a new resolution. The issue is being discussed in the media and in the expert community, but there has been no serious [official] discussion, as the UN Charter requires.

The Americans came first; they were followed by their loyal allies, with their own troops. That's how the ISAF format emerged. They asked for a UN Security Council mandate, and we supported that request based on the notion that this is a question of war and peace, a question of regional and international security, and the UN Security Council must control any foreign troops deployed in a third country. Russia and the other Security Council members (not just the P5) gave the mandate. We expect that because this entity is now leaving Afghanistan (having entered the country with the Security Council permission), it should report to the Security Council about its achievements or lack thereof. It should receive a proper assessment before leaving. Why? The answer seems obvious to me: the tasks set all those years ago have not been achieved. Well, they can leave without first securing the Security Council go-ahead (just as they entered the country). But this is a very important issue of principle for the world order. It is important because in the future, when any of our Security Council partners have the temptation to send their troops somewhere else, we will say to them: we have already had a similar situation in the past, we gave our consent out of the very best intentions, but look what happened in the end! So let us not hurry, let us develop a set of rules, principles and criteria. This is very important for the future.

So, by early October the 33,000 extra troops which Obama sent to Afghanistan will have been pulled out. Another 68,000 or so of US troops will remain in the country until the end of 2014. The Americans say all combat units will be pulled out; the remaining troops will only train the Afghan security forces. To that end the Americans will keep 5 to 7 *training bases*. But these bases are, in fact, not just for training. They are proper military bases, they are there as part of a clear regional agenda, and we understand that very well. The Americans are trying to dodge the question, they just keep repeating their usual mantra: "no, no, we don't want any permanent bases, we pose no threat, these are merely training facilities". But let us imagine a situation where there are no combat units left. The Taliban remains undefeated. It is 100,000-strong. Over the past 10 years it has turned into a real military-political force. So how will the remaining training units defend themselves at those bases, with only 20,000 or 30,000 soldiers? Obviously, they will be besieged, or even destroyed. So we are trying to obtain a direct answer to a direct question. The Americans do not have a clear strategy in Afghanistan, and, frankly speaking, it is hard to imagine any such strategy emerging. A strategy is a vision of the process for the next decade or even several decades. The American strategy is limited to the remaining term of office of the serving president. As soon as the new president arrives in the White House, all the existing plans are re-jigged. This is gyration, not strategy. But the overall goal seems clear. It was announced by George W. Bush: for the first time in NATO's history the United States has brought the alliance to the part of the world we are talking about. We understand very well that ideally, the Americans would like to keep those bases as their powerful leverage in the region. Also, in the event of a large regional conflict those bases can be used to support a military effort in the entire region.

The Americans have a clear reason for trying to extricate themselves from Afghan as soon as possible. They are shifting all their resources to the Asia Pacific theatre, where they will act as a counterbalance to China. That is why in Afghanistan they are now shifting the security responsibility on the Afghan army and police, and doing so in such a hurried, rushed and haphazard manner. The security handover has already been completed on 50 per cent of the Afghan territory; the figure is to rise to 75 per cent before the year's end, and to 100 per cent by mid-2013.

**SECURITY INDEX:** Has sufficient ground been laid for such a handover?

**KABULOV:** No. Even as we speak, many of the territories handed over to the Afghan forces are no longer controlled by the Afghan government (although this is not being admitted at the Republican or Democratic party congresses). Some of these territories are now in the hands of the Taliban; others are being ruled by tribal chieftains. These chieftains have no fixed political affiliation; one day they can work with the Taliban, the next day they can work with the government. There are also territories being run by bandits and drug traffickers.

I am not trying to say that the entire 75 percent of the territory transferred under the Afghan control is being lost. But some fairly important, strategically significant areas are. They include areas along major roads, such as the Kabul-Kandahar, Kandahar-Herat and Jalalabad-Kabul highways, and they are very important for the continued stability and resilience of the regime. This is clearly a worrying development, which could have very serious consequences.

**SECURITY INDEX:** Is there an understanding among the Afghans that Afghanistan is a single country, or do they exist as separate regional groups? Do members of the various tribes and regional groupings think of themselves as Afghan citizens?

**KABULOV:** As I have already said, this single country does exist in the minds of the Afghans, in some kind of nostalgic *parallel* world. But the reality is very different. The country consists of separate regions, it is not a united powerful nation. The connection between the center and the provinces is tenuous. It holds only so long as the central government keeps the money flowing to these provinces, and maintains some military strength. Unfortunately, I can't say at the moment that there are any strong links between the provinces and the center.

**SECURITY INDEX:** How likely is the Northern Alliance to be resurrected in some shape or form?

**KABULOV:** It is not unlikely. If the Pashtuns led by Karzai unite with the rest of the Pashtuns, i.e. those still not involved in the running of the country, the other ethnic groups may see that as a threat. If that happens, the Northern Alliance, which has ceased to exist for the time being, may well rise again under the leadership of the regional strongmen. Such a scenario would lead to a civil war. Unfortunately, it cannot be completely ruled out.

**SECURITY INDEX:** Do you believe that the Afghan army and police will be able to provide security after the ISAF drawdown in 2014? Does Moscow believe that it is necessary to keep some foreign military presence in Afghanistan after 2014?

**KABULOV:** The Americans themselves admit that of the 300,000-strong Afghan forces, no more than 10 per cent are combat-ready, i.e. capable of conducting independent operations and of maintaining security on their territory. The Afghan army and police are better armed than the Taliban, there is no doubt about it. Nevertheless, they are still losing this war.

One of the reasons for that, I think, is the lack of motivation. Many if not most Afghan officers (let alone ordinary soldiers) do not believe that they are defending their country's interests. They think of themselves as instruments of American strategies. Such an army can never be a good fighting force because it is not ready to risk their lives and die, if need be, to achieve the objectives set before it.

Another strength of the Taliban (and the government's weakness) is that the Taliban view NATO as an occupying force and a threat to Islam. That view is shared by many in the Afghan army and police. A case in point is the increasingly frequent shootings of American and NATO personnel by rogue Afghan soldiers and police. The Americans have put themselves in a silly situation by first declaring that only about 10 percent of these incidents (of which there has been 30-32 this year, with about 50 people killed) were committed by the Taliban or their agents. Are we to understand, then, that the remaining 90 per cent are not even Taliban, but they are still killing Americans? The very same people who were armed, trained and paid by the Americans are now killing American soldiers? Look what you have brought this country to, I want to say to the Americans. Well, they later said that a further 15 percent of the cases were attacks by people who are not Taliban but are affiliated with the Taliban. So a quarter of these incidents can be blamed on the Taliban. That figure is still an indictment. The attacks have not yet become a truly common occurrence, and the Americans are now hurriedly trying to screen the people they have recruited - but it's already too late.

They have built a 300,000-strong army, but the level of desertion is extremely high at 30 per cent. This is another indication that the whole venture has utterly failed. On top of the 30 per cent figure there is another 15-20 per cent who are absent depending on the season, i.e. the so-called temporary deserters. Many of the ordinary soldiers are from the rural areas. They have been issued with weapons and kit, they have left their families - but when the time comes to bring the harvest in they need to go back to their villages. If they are allowed a few weeks leave, well and good. If not, they just disappear anyway, and then return a couple of months later (nothing is done very quickly in Afghanistan). The Afghan army is very different from what a proper army is supposed to look like. How an army like that will fight is anyone's guess.

Most Afghans dislike the Taliban, but they also remember that in some respects life was better under the Taliban. For example, a Pashtun from some small village knows that if he does not fight the Taliban, if he just minds his own business, the Taliban will leave him alone and will not cause any trouble. They will force him to pray and abide by stringent [Islamic] rules, but he does not see that as something

very onerous. The ethnic minorities, on the other hand, i.e. the non-Pashtuns, really do have a good reason to fear for their future.

Another weakness of the Afghan army is that it is very lopsided in terms of its ethnic composition. In previous years Pashtuns traditionally made up about 90 per cent of the Afghan officer corps. Now they are in a minority. The non-Pashtun officers find it more difficult to control their units stationed in the Pashtun-dominated areas. These officers are being seen as aliens. If it ever comes to the break-up of the country, all these armed units will leave for their homes in northern and central Afghanistan and make their stand there. A civil war will break out. Another danger is that if the country collapses, these 300,000 people [in the Afghan security forces] will be left unemployed and unpaid. They may well end up becoming bandits.

**SECURITY INDEX:** How capable is the Afghan army? Does it have any armor, artillery and aircraft?

**KABULOV:** One cannot compare the present Afghan army with the army the country had built with Soviet assistance. In the early 1980s the Afghan army was the strongest in the region - and I mean not only in terms of firepower, but structurally as well. The present Afghan army has some armor, but most of it is old Soviet-made hardware. In 2004-2005 Russia supplied large amounts of non-lethal weapons, including spare parts, communication equipment, etc. The Afghan army has been reformatted to comply with the NATO standards, which require a certain level of equipment. These standards, however, are not being met. The situation in the Afghan air force is even worse. In theory, the country has an air corps, but it does not have a single combat aircraft. Most of the existing *Mi-17* helicopters are from Eastern Europe; some were bought from Russia with American money. The Afghans don't have any *Mi-35* [attack] helicopters, but they do have a few *Mi-24s*.

In any event, the Americans don't have any plans of building a capable Afghan air force – and without an air force no army can be truly capable.

**SECURITY INDEX:** But that must be part of some larger strategy?

**KABULOV:** That is correct. But the Americans are saying that they are pulling out of Afghanistan, and that they are leaving behind a capable Afghan army. How is that army supposed to fight when even the American ground troops, which are far better equipped than the Afghan forces, cannot fight without air cover? How can the Afghan forces achieve the same objectives?

In guerrilla warfare, victory cannot be achieved by using only regular troops. It also takes a lot of relevant experience and expertise, and that is yet another problem. The Americans have belatedly realized this. They are now training special task forces in an effort to create an Afghan *spetsnaz*. But it takes decades, it takes a lot of work in many areas, including morale and discipline. Well, something will be done in the end to address this problem, but it may be too late.

**SECURITY INDEX:** What will be the risks and security implications of the foreign troop pullout from Afghanistan for the Central Asian states?

**KABULOV:** The risks are quite clear. An unstable Afghanistan, with Islamists fighting on its territory, inevitably raises the risks in Central Asia, especially Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The less economically developed and socially stable the country, the higher the risks are. We are worried by the general situation in Afghanistan, as well as by the large concentration of militants and Islamists in the north and especially the northeast of the country. Over the past 3-4 years the number of armed rebels there has increased from about a thousand to 7,000-8,000. Some of them have moved to Afghanistan from their camps in Pakistan. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is also very active there. We are not yet seeing any mass infiltration of rebels to Tajik territory, but the process is well under way. They are crossing into Tajikistan in small groups to foment unrest. For example, these rebels were involved in recent fighting in the Gorno-Badakhshanskiy autonomous region of Tajikistan. They are also coming to other parts of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. For now they are not numerous enough to be a formidable power that can threaten the stability of the regimes in those countries. But they can act as a catalyst of various crises. The situation in these republics is like a tinderbox - one spark can be enough to set off a conflagration. That is exactly how it happened in Andijan, and how it is happening in Fergana Valley and elsewhere.

The very fact that the Americans have been forced to declare victory and are packing their bags is seen by the pro-opposition Tajiks, Uzbeks, and others as a victory won by their fellow Islamists in Afghanistan over the infidels. They start thinking, "if they can do it, we can do it, too". That is the real danger - radical Islamist ideology is becoming more attractive to fellow Muslims in Central Asia. This is not a problem likely to blow up tomorrow, it's not yet imminent - but we need to prepare ourselves for the possibility of regional problems caused by radical Islamist ideology, perhaps even a region-wide conflict.

**SECURITY INDEX:** Some believe that the CSTO is not making sufficient preparations for such a contingency. What can the organization really do to help resolve the Afghan problem? And what are the difficulties it is facing?

**KABULOV:** The CSTO is a military alliance, which has its own charter and rules, as well as some limitations and restrictions imposed by these rules. There are things which the CSTO members have agreed to, such as joint exercises, training and preparations. Russia is arming them; CSTO members can buy Russian arms and military supplies at discounted prices, etc. But as for joint defense, the problem is not just that some members don't want to engage in such military cooperation. There are also some restrictions in the actual charter, which sets out the decision-making process. This is a young organization, it is still in the early phases of its existence. It is very difficult to compare it to NATO, which has much higher standards of military cooperation.

**SECURITY INDEX:** The cross-border projects that can be implemented in Afghanistan – such as power lines, pipelines and transport hubs – are often seen as a way of engaging Afghanistan in regional cooperation. Do you think that the implementation of such projects should come after the consolidation of the country, or vice versa?

**KABULOV:** Unfortunately, all these things must happen simultaneously. When the United States was ramping up its troop numbers in Afghanistan we kept saying that they cannot win the war unless they pay attention to the country's economy. At first they brushed it aside, but eventually they were forced to turn to the experience of the Soviet Union (which did try to improve the Afghan economy). At that point it was already too late. After the Taliban crumbled, the entire north of Afghanistan was calm. There were only small local gangs there, whose members had to resort to crime so as to be able to feed their families. Had the Americans created even basic conditions for the development of small local projects, these projects would have absorbed large numbers of the local population, including men of the fighting age. But they didn't do it, and correcting that strategic mistake is very difficult at this point.

When I was the Russian ambassador to Afghanistan, President Karzai liked to reminisce about Soviet aid. I was obliged to explain that, to begin with, the Soviet Union no longer exists. And second, if one travels 100 km from Moscow, one can find Russian villages where people are living in no better conditions than in Afghanistan. Once we have realized our potential and become richer, we will discuss help to the Afghan farmers. For now, however, Russia simply cannot afford such help.

For example, the power transmission line project is an interesting one, but Russia alone cannot pull it off. Let the Americans and the Japanese join in - then it will become feasible. During a visit to Moscow by Hamid Karzai the two sides discussed the CASA-1000 project, which involves producing electricity in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and then supplying it to Afghanistan and on to Pakistan. Naturally, Afghanistan will not be receiving electricity free of charge, but it will be able to make some money on transit to Pakistan. Russia was ready to invest in this project on the condition that its own *INTER RAO YeES* become the operator of the power line, and that other countries also join the project. Several years on, nothing has been done. The main problem is building the power plants in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. There is not enough money for that, and the two countries also expect Russia to supply the necessary funds.

Are there risks involved? Of course there are. Had there been no risks, Western companies would have already been there – they are nimbler than Russia's own. China is another competitor. It is quite possible that at some point in the future the region's market will become rather crowded.

We want to maintain the ties established in Soviet times, but we are not coping. The Chinese, meanwhile, are working very energetically. This is competition. What should Russia do in this situation? Logic dictates that Russia should enter with a lot of investment to improve the Central Asian economy, to make our investments more attractive. But in order to invest in Central Asia we must cut investment programs here in Russia. No sensible manager will agree to that in the current circumstances. We will help our neighbors develop their economy, but not to our own detriment. We still have the whole of Siberia to develop. There are many interesting ideas, but we cannot afford to implement them because our resources are very limited. And in those cases where we do invest, we must at least

receive some political dividends, which will lead on to economic profit. That is the only sensible approach to justify Russian participation in those cross-border projects in Central Asia which include Afghanistan. We should act pragmatically and calmly. Most importantly, we should not throw money around.