

The Myth of the Afghan threat

*and a New Reality in Central Asia
on the Threshold of 2014*

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Abstract

The article examines the extent to which Afghanistan constitutes a threat to Central Asia. The conventional thinking on the issue sees the security in Central Asia and Afghanistan as closely associated, and thus suggests that the level of security in Central Asia is directly proportional to the level of security in Afghanistan. This is because the stability in Central Asia is considered to be fragile, both by local politicians and the international community, and the region's proximity to Afghanistan magnifies this fragility. Thus considering that NATO's stabilization mission in Afghanistan will be concluded in 2014, entailing the significant reduction of U.S. and allied forces on the ground, this conventional view gives rise to serious concerns. To a certain extent, the fears concerning the developments after 2014 may appear to be reasonable. However, as this article holds, a critical approach towards the assumption of "the Afghan threat to Central Asia," is fruitful. This approach proposes that Afghanistan did not, does not and will not constitute either a direct strategic threat to Central Asia, nor a reason or necessary condition for destabilization. Based on this thinking, the fears for regional stability are nothing more than "mythological thinking," a self-fulfilling prophecy, as well as a useful argument misused for the purposes of internal and external policies. Accordingly, the Afghan myth justifies and stimulates the fight against Islamic movements, and further justifies the involvement of external players in the regional security dynamic: hence the presence of Russia in the region, U.S. bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, a French base in Tajikistan and a German base in Uzbekistan. The article concludes by arguing that the Afghan threat in Central Asia is definitely mythologized, overestimated and instrumentalized. However, this not mean that the region is currently or will be stable in the symbolic year of 2014, or that NATO's withdrawal will remain without consequences for the region.

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The notion of persistent threat to stability is a fixed category in external perceptions of Central Asia, on the part of both local politicians and the outside world. The fear has its origins in numerous internal factors (the difficult process of state-building as well as political, social and economic transformation under the conditions of dynamic changes, crises, overvaluations and conflicts) and external ones (inter alia, instability and the turbulent process of filling of the geopolitical vacuum left by the USSR in the region).

The fear over Central Asia is magnified by the region's proximity to Afghanistan – an area which for over 30 years has been fraught by conflict and internal tensions, and which has generated security problems on a global scale (notably the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001). In practice, the perception of security in Central Asia has become closely associated with the situation in Afghanistan; that is, the level of security in Central Asia is perceived as directly proportional to the level of security in Afghanistan.¹

The question of links between Central Asia and Afghanistan is now returning with renewed strength: the stabilization mission in Afghanistan headed by NATO – ISAF will be concluded in

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2014 (the process of troop withdrawal is currently ongoing), with a likelihood of a significant reduction of US and allied forces operating within the Operation Enduring Freedom. The 13-year period during which the West was directly responsible for Afghanistan, and as such had a direct influence on security in Central Asia, will come to an end. According to the paradigm governing perceptions of Afghanistan and Central Asia by the region, the West and Russia, 2014 marks as the beginning of the probable breakdown of the fragile stability in Afghanistan, which will pose a serious threat to its northern neighbors.²

This mode of thought, illustrated by numerous examples, is deeply embedded in the public consciousness, and is reasonable to the extent that there are indeed serious challenges

¹ Compare : A. Rashid, "Taliban. Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia", Yale University Press 2001. A. Rashid, "Jihad. The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia", Yale University Press 2002. T. Donnelly, "Fergana as FATA, Central Asia after 2014 – Outcomes and Strategic Options", <http://fmsso.leavenworth.army.mil/Collaboration/FAO/Fergana-as-FATA.pdf>

² For further information: S. Blank, "Central Asian Perspectives on Afghanistan After the US Withdrawal", The George Washington University, November 2012, at http://037eabf.net-solhost.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Afghanistan_Forum_2_November_2012.pdf . S. Blank (ed.), "Central Asia after 2014", Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, November 2014 <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/PUB1175.pdf>

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for the stability of Afghanistan and Central Asia, and there are strong ties between them. Fears concerning the developments after 2014 also appear to be reasonable. However, a critical approach towards the assumption of the “Afghan threat to Central Asia,” so fervently raised on the eve of 2014, also seems reasonable. It is a clear example of “mythological thinking,” a self-fulfilling prophecy, and at the same time, an very useful argument that is being misused for the purposes of internal policy (in Central Asia it justifies mobilization and provides grounds for soliciting external aid) and external policy (it justifies the involvement of external players in regional security). Afghanistan did not, does not and will not constitute either a direct strategic threat to Central Asia, nor a reason or necessary condition for destabilization. In spite of the rhetoric and the catastrophic scenarios forecasted for the region, in reality, this threat is unlikely to materialize.

The myth of the Afghan threat to post-Soviet Central Asia

The key aspects of the myth of the Afghan threat in Central Asia include:

- The assumption about the “power and aggression” of Af-

ghans, stemming from the trauma following the defeat of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979-1989), considered as one of the reasons for the fall of the Empire. This trauma is widely propagated by the political elites of the region, and managed by the participants and witnesses of the collapse of the Empire. It is also actively present in mass culture and media.

- The assumption that Afghanistan is a fertilizing ground for radical and militant Islam, in ideological terms, but also technically and logistically. A vivid example of this was supporting and harboring Tajik *mujahideen* during the civil war (1992-1997), and harboring Uzbek radicals in the late 1990s (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan). With support in Afghanistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan organized unsuccessful raids on Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000. The aim of these raids was to topple the existing regime, and establish an emirate or caliphate based in Fergana Valley. After these plans collapsed, “the Uzbeks” quickly became an organic element of both the so-called Al-Qaeda and local terrorist networks, and are nowadays capable of conducting terrorist activities on a global scale. But

any group accused of terrorist and militant activity in Central Asia is always associated with Afghanistan.³

- The assumption that Afghan radicals, including the Taliban (during the period of their rule and in the future), and Al-Qa-eda, are inherently interested in territorial expansion and a march towards Central Asia. The proof for the existence of this assumption is demonstrated, for example, by the reaction of the surrounding actors to the seizure of Kabul by Taliban in 1996. Both the conflict parties in the brutal civil war in Tajikistan, as well as their external patrons (i.e. Russia and Iran), took action to end the war in Tajikistan (June 1997) and to coordinate military assistance for the Afghan Northern Alliance, which fought against the Taliban and served as a buffer for their expansion further north.
- The assumption that Afghanistan is generating a range of threats in the area of soft security – primarily related to the activity of drug cartels, but also to the “export” of refugees.

Under this approach, the “Afghan problem” is a mainstay of national

security policies across the entire region. Afghanistan justifies and stimulates the fight against Islamic movements, which are automatically associated with Afghan radical movements. Among those accused of having ties with Afghanistan are not only representatives of armed or terrorist groups (for example the alleged IMU members), but also activists of the Hizb ut-Tahrir or Tablighi Jamaat organizations. In the propaganda spread by the media, all attempts to Islamize the public sphere have been and still are compared to Afghanistan.

The Afghan problem justifies the necessity of a decisive struggle against any threats to security - an Afghan link also emerged during the uprising in the Uzbek Andijan and adjacent towns in May of 2005 and during the conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbek in June of 2010, yet in both cases, ultimately there was no evidence. It is also used to justify and gives meaning to various aspects of international relations. In case of the latter, the Afghan problem was, is, and will be the primary explanation for the military presence of Russia in the region: it is the explanation for the existence of CSTO, which officially was created to provide security from outside threats for post-Soviet states. Furthermore, every instance of regional instability results in efforts by Central Asian states to secure Russian political and military assistance.⁴

3 Compare T. Donnelly, “Fergana as FATA, Central Asia after 2014 – Outcomes and Strategic Options”, <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/Collaboration/FAO/Fergana-as-FATA.pdf>

4 Николай Бордюжа, “В Афганистане могут подготовить сирийский сценарий для стран ОДКБ”, [headline.kz](#)

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Finally, the Afghan problem is also the essential foundation for the development of relations between regional states and the U.S. and NATO following 9/11. Unprecedented and unexpected military cooperation took place (for example, via U.S. bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, French base in Tajikistan and German in Uzbekistan), and later on the Northern Distribution Network, a transport corridor to Afghanistan for ISAF's supply needs.⁵ Cooperation with the West on this gave rise to direct financial benefits, upgrading of political relations, and increased levels of security. It also resulted in the modernization and development of transport infrastructure (for example, the construction of the railroad connection between Uzbekistan and Afghan

21.10.2013 http://news.headline.kz/chto_v_strane/nikolay_bordyuja_v_afganistane_mogut_podgotovit_siriyskiy_stsenarij_dlya_stran_odkb.html

⁵ For further information: CSIS, Northern Distribution Network Program, <http://csis.org/program/northern-distribution-network-ndn>

Mazar-i Sharif). In this context, 2014 threatens the return of the greatest external threat (strictly related to the internal threats) for the region and a threat of radical overvaluations in relations with the powers from outside the region (mainly Russia, the U.S. and China).

Between myths and reality

Although the myth of the Afghan threat for Central Asia appeals to historical reality, and has a tangible impact on the current security thinking in and about the region, it cannot be - and indeed does not seem to be - treated as reality.

First of all, it is based on a biased interpretation of the situation in Afghanistan – in reference to both the past and the projections for the future.

The trauma following the defeat of the Soviet intervention (and now the projected perspective of the “defeat” of the U.S. policy towards Afghanistan) cannot overshadow the fact that after 1989 it was the USSR and Russia (later on also Uzbekistan and to a lesser degree Tajikistan) who were conducting active policy in Afghanistan by supporting the reign of Najibullah, and after his downfall, the Northern Alliance. In other words, in the relationship between Central Asia and Afghanistan, the traditional direction of expansion (and interference in internal affairs) runs from north to south, not vice versa.⁶ Obviously, the

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It would be excessive to seek out the origins of Afghan Islamic radicalism in Central Asia – it was an endemic phenomenon across the region; Islam is inalienable element of the identity of Central Asian societies, with its own traditions of political activity.⁷ It is embedded in local political and social tensions (the case of the war in Tajikistan, conflict was rooted in tensions amongst the local elites regarding the division of power in the republic after the disintegration of USSR, and the introduction of ideology had only a secondary character), and further inspired by general processes concerning the world of Islam and organically related to the transformations taking place in Islam in

be seen in the region's history for at least two thousand years.

7 The last units of the anti-Soviet guerrillas (with strong Islamic features), the so-called Basmachis, were liquidated in the late 1930s. Amongst those who referred to the Basmachis's legacy, was the founder of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – Tohir Yuldashev.

the post-Soviet area (the case of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan in the 90's illustrates this point). The further fate of Uzbek radicals (the evolution from local and ineffective actions in the Fergana Valley to their current strong position in Afghanistan) may, paradoxically, speak in favor of the transfer of radicalism in the opposite direction: from Central Asia to Afghanistan.⁸

The perceived threat of the Taliban's march towards Central Asia has no factual basis: this movement has been decisively focused on Afghanistan and has not undertaken any steps towards expansion; for Turkmenistan, for example, it was a reliable economic and political partner (Turkmenistan was the co-organizer and host for negotiations between Taliban and the Northern Alliance). There is nothing signaling a shift in the approach of the current Taliban leadership – at least with regard to Central Asia. Al-Qaeda has remained surprisingly indifferent to Central Asia – according to rather extreme opinions, several (up to 20) bomb attacks during the last decade (which have resulted in tens of people being killed) may be attributed to its inspiration. It is noteworthy that despite the ongoing presence since 2001 of U.S. forces and infrastructure in the region, the latter were not a target of a single attack from by the Taliban or

8 For further information: M. Falkowski, K. Strachota, "Jihad vs. The New Great Game. Paradoxes of militant Islamic threats in Central Asia", OSW Policy Briefs, Warsaw 2010 http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/punkt_widzenia_21.pdf J. Lang, "Radical Islamic militants of Central Asia", OSW Report, Warsaw 2013 (planned for publication in November 2013)

Al Qaeda. The scale and effectiveness of the alleged involvement of IMU and IJU in Central Asia clearly shows the weakness of these organizations in confrontation with the security apparatuses of the region's states. The threat of the incitement of an Islamic uprising/revolution by these organizations, along with that of launching a wave of terror attacks, remain a fictional scenario. In the present setting, one may presume that conflicts in the Middle East (e.g. in Syria) will remain a priority for the decision-makers and sponsors of Islamic radicals affiliated with Afghanistan and that there will be no will to disperse means and open new frontlines on a new, Central Asian section. Proof for that is found in the rerouting of the inflow of volunteers (also those from the post-Soviet area), previously directed to Afghanistan and Waziristan, to Syria (which is easily accessible and more dynamic), and even an outflow of forces from Afghanistan itself.

Although it is clearly difficult to downplay the problems of drugs, refugees, and so on, one must bear in mind that organized crime and allegations about its ties to the political elites of Central Asian states are not a new phenomenon, just related to Afghanistan and subordinated to Afghan mafias. Moreover, with regard to the threat of refugees, one must remember that out of the 5-6 million Afghan refugees in the 1980s and 1990s only a tiny portion ended up in Central Asia – in contrast to at least several

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tens of thousands of Tajik refugees who fled to Afghanistan during the civil war in the 90s.

The more or less openly assumed scenario of Afghanistan's collapse following the termination of the ISAF mission in 2014 is, it seems, the most vivid manifestation of mythical thinking about Afghanistan. However serious the challenge may be, the catastrophic scenarios are currently (and historically – taking into account the three years of Najibullah's rule after the formal withdrawal of Soviet forces) unjustified, and the assumption about the inevitable and immediate spill over of the possible Afghan conflict is improbable. It seems that all of the sides engaged in the intra-Afghan conflicts realize the necessity of a political settlement, based on current institutional and legal frameworks. However, this does not equate to their commitment to relinquish armed struggle and terrorist activity.

Finally, the practical attitude of the states that have exposed to both the past and present threats from Afghanistan, especially the regional states and Russia, is symptomatic. The domi-

nant feature of rhetoric with respect to Afghanistan is, as described, the indication of a serious military and terrorist threat. This lies at the heart of the activity of CSTO⁹; it is strongly related to the statutory assumptions of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (“the fight with radicalism, terrorism and separatism”)¹⁰ and finally, bilateral cooperation of the states of the region in the field of security, and especially with Russia. After 20 years of an ongoing threat emanating from Afghanistan, cooperation at the regional level is equivalent, at most, to the level of mistrust or hostility between the individual states. The CSTO (which is difficult to treat as an alliance due to Russia’s disproportionate influence and its absolute monopoly in drafting the affairs and shaping the evolution of the organization) has not developed instruments or mechanisms to coordinate actions with respect to Afghanistan. In recent years, the discussion on the potential use of CSTO forces in internal, and not external conflicts¹¹, has dominated, while the states that are potentially most exposed to threats from Afghanistan are either leaving the CSTO (e.g. as Uzbekistan did in 2012) or are refusing to allow Russians to rein-

9 Compare: *Collective Security Treaty Organization* <http://www.odkb-csto.org/>

10 Compare: *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* <http://www.secsco.org/RU123/>

11 A substantial impulse here was the coup in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and the parallel ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. It initiated a discussion about the possibility of an intervention of CSTO (de facto Russian) forces in the internal affairs of the member states.

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force controls on the border with Afghanistan (Tajikistan).¹² The SCO, to an even greater extent, plays a purely symbolic role (via facade advisory institutions – such as the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure with its headquarters in Tashkent), which seems to be connected primarily to Russia’s fears over China strengthening its position in the sphere of regional security. The position of Turkmenistan presents a highly critical review of the Afghan threat: Turkmenistan remains neutral, does not cooperate with its neighbors or Russia, and traditionally maintains good relations with the most important powers in Afghanistan. The frequently raised concept of the Afghan threat either reveals extreme political blindness in the states of the region (which should be doubted) or is at least a secondary threat in regard to the specific challenges within the region, tensions between and within individual states, or Russia’s attempts

12 Tajikistan decisively opposes the return of Russian border troops to its border with Afghanistan; for an extended period of time – until September of 2013 – it withheld the ratification of treaty prolonging the stationing of the Russian 201 Base on the territory of Tajikistan.

to strengthen its own position in Central Asia.¹³

Prevailing uncertainty for 2014

Although the Afghan threat in Central Asia is definitely mythologized, overestimated and instrumentalized, this does not mean that the region is and will remain stable in the symbolic year of 2014, or that this threat will remain without consequences for the region.

Central Asia is a region that remains chronically exposed to destabilization (as is each state to a varying degree). Tensions related to the social, demographic and cultural transformations (inter alia, the growth of the role of Islam, including Salafi and radical circles¹⁴), inefficiency of the economic systems, weakness of political systems (including challenges associated with the succession of power, which is of utmost importance in the two biggest and most important countries of the region – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), and the relatively high likelihood of violence in political life all contribute to this. The risk of escalation of tensions cannot be excluded in any of the regional states – in every one of them, an Islamic, terrorist

¹³ For further information: R.N. McDermott, "Central Asian Security Post 2014. Perspectives in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan", DIIS Report 2013:12, at http://en.diis.dk/files/publications/Reports2013/RP2013-12-McDermott-Kazakhstan_web.jpg.pdf

¹⁴ The problem is most visible in Western Kazakhstan, the area with the weakest Islamic traditions in the region, remote from region's main religious centers. Salafi movements in Kazakhstan are organically linked with similar movements in the Russian Federation (mainly those from Northern Caucasus), not Afghanistan.

or militant motif involving external players (including, potentially, groups based in Afghanistan)¹⁵ may emerge. Nevertheless, possible Afghan traces are undoubtedly over-emphasized by the authorities, and the media should not overplay the endemic character of the problems and the secondary nature of the Afghan factor in the absolute majority of possible cases. The problems threatened by 2014 will play an almost exclusively a symbolic and superficial role in this matter.

Central Asia in a bipolar world

2014 will constitute a significant turning point in the relations of Central Asia and the West (NATO, U.S.), as well as indirectly in terms of the geopolitical aspect, which is important for the functioning of the region.

The involvement of the U.S. and NATO in the region in connection with the operation in Afghanistan (2001-2014), apart from the temporary and tangible practical aspect (bases, transit of people and goods, development of infrastructure) carried a tremendous political load. According to the assumptions of both sides, the mission was meant to bolster the stability of the region and individual states, as well as empower of states

¹⁵ An example of this was the emergence of the Jund Al Khalifah organization in Kazakhstan. It is held responsible for a series of bomb attacks there in 2011 and 2012. The organization was created based on Salafi circles, with inspiration coming from the Islamic Jihad Union. Despite seriously limited strength and effectiveness, the organization's activity reveals an area that could be utilized by radicals from outside the region. For further information, see J. Lang, "Radical Islamic militants of Central Asia", OSW Report, Warsaw 2013 (planned for publication in November 2013)

in terms of their national security, political and economic dimensions, in light of the diminishing effectiveness of interdependencies inherited from the USSR and maintained by Russia. As one consequence, among others, a greater openness to cooperation with the West (although also South Asia, for example) was to be achieved. The goals set forth have been achieved to a significant degree: due to cooperation with the West, individual states have received financial support, raised the level of national security, strengthened their international legitimacy and increased room for political maneuver. In several important ways, the goals turned out to be overly optimistic: the assumed impulse for the transformation and modernization of the region had been overestimated, the level of trust between region's elites and the West insufficient, and day-to-day cooperation difficult. The NDN did not live up to expectations – Pakistan remains the main and most attractive transport corridor with Afghanistan for the coalition and the existing infrastructure is being gradually dismantled (the closure of the Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan is planned for the July of 2014). Unfortunately, the temporary benefits (and costs) of cooperation with the West have not translated into stronger relations between the region and NATO/U.S. on a systemic and long-term basis.¹⁶

¹⁶ For further information: S. Blank (ed.), "Central Asia after 2014", Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, November 2014 <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute>.

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The expected reduction or termination of the U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan after 2014 will be accompanied by a range of simultaneous processes, namely, a far smaller economic presence in the region than previously expected, redefinition of strategic assumptions on a global level, passiveness of the American policy, economic crisis, a dynamic development of Chinese influences in the region, etc. This will entail the loss of a platform which has hitherto organized the activity in Central Asia, a significant reduction in Western involvement in the region, and the loss of its position by one of the key strategic actors in the region. Inevitably, the West (especially NATO) will face the need to redefine its assumptions, goals and instruments both in Afghanistan and in Central Asia.

Substantial limitation of the Western presence in Afghanistan and Cen-

army.mil/pdf/files/PUB1175.pdf

M. Laruelle, S. Peyroule, V. Axyonova, "The Afghanistan-Central Asia Relationship: What Role for the EU?", EUCAM Working Paper No. 13 http://www.frise.org/download/EUCAM_WP13_Afghanistan.pdf

J. Mankoff, "The United States and Central Asia after 2014", CSIS January 2013, http://csis.org/files/publication/130122_Mankoff_USCentralAsia_Web.pdf

Substantial limitation of the Western presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia with regard to 2014 lays an open ground for Russia and China.

tral Asia with regard to 2014 lays an open ground for Russia and China. For Russia, 2014 presents further opportunities to attempt to rebuild its position in Central Asia, centering on security (i.e. the further development of the CSTO) as well as political and economic issues (based on Customs Union and Eurasian integration projects). The effectiveness of these organizations is still a subject for elaboration (CSTO and the problem of Russia's military presence in Central Asia; Kazakhstan's growing criticism of the Customs Union, and so on), yet the key issue is their political significance – and with regard to the changes associated with 2014, this means an increasing Russian pressure on the region. In terms of the security issues regarding Central Asia and Afghanistan, one can expect Russia's reactive stance (contrary to popular opinion there are no direct threats to Russia's security originating from Afghanistan or Central Asia) and Russian attempts to manage the potential internal tensions in the particular states.

However, the most important strategic challenge will be the new phase of rivalry with China over the influence in the region. For years this has been suppressed by, in particular, the

U.S./NATO presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia, which was feared simultaneously by Moscow and Beijing. China's position in Central Asia (as well as in Afghanistan) is systematically growing – it reveals its power mainly through economic activity, the consequence of which is China's increasing political influence and ambition, aimed securing its own interests.¹⁷The last two decades show that China has been able to maintain the security of Xinjiang (China's priority in the region) mainly through effective cooperation with Central Asia, as well as with Pakistan (which has a direct influence on the development of situation in Afghanistan, including leverage on Islamic radicals). Such an approach – soft influence on existing political structures utilizing economic instruments – can be considered a key characteristic of Chinese policy, and one that can be expected to emerge towards Afghanistan and Central Asia in 2014. However, the effectiveness of this policy threatens Russia's position in the region to a much greater degree that the presence of U.S. forces in Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, China's instruments are not effective in the situations of violent crises and collapse of the state structures (as revealed during the 2010 crisis in Kyrgyzstan), which situations that may well occur in the region in the future. Subsequently, one can expect a con-

17 For further information: A. Jarosiewicz, K. Strachota, "China vs. Central Asia. The achievements of the past two decades", *OSW Studies*, 2013, at http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/prace_45_cina_vs_asia_ang-net.pdf

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frontation of the two rival powers and two models of influence- building in Central Asia and its neighborhood (Afghanistan). These aspects of the change, which is represented by 2014 together with the internal dynamics of the region's states, will play a crucial role in shaping the situation in this part of the world.