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AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN BETWEEN THE US NEW STRATEGY AND EURASIAN GREAT POWERS

INTRODUCTION

One of the most intricate matters when it comes to fighting against terrorism in Afghanistan and South Asia is the perpetual conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The role of Pakistan is a central debate in all security, political and economic subjects of discussion in Afghanistan since its dawn of existence as a country. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, as the President of Afghanistan, believes his country is in a state of an undeclared war with Pakistan. The reason for this is that Pakistan plays a double-standard policy towards Afghanistan by having diplomatic relations with Kabul while actively supports the Taliban and terrorist groups who fight against the Afghan government and conduct terrorist attacks and bombings in the country.

India shares the same point of view about Pakistan, thus becoming the most important strategic partner of Afghanistan in the region. Both countries are actively trying to turn the international community and international and Eurasian powers against Pakistan. Recently, the USA's President has accepted its lobby and diplomacy. Today, America, Afghanistan, and India have a common voice in the fight against terrorism and its regional roots, which are in Pakistan. The practical result of this common voice is the newly shaped America-India-Afghan (AIA) strategic trinity against terrorism and Pakistan.

In this article, we focus on:

- The US new strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan
- Afghanistan's new position in the US foreign policy
- The reaction and response of Pakistan, China, and Russia to the US new strategy
- The fragmentation and lack of common initiatives among Eurasian large powers as far as the fight against terrorism and other trans-regional threats is concerned
- The practical and possible outcome of the newly AIA strategical trinity or shift for the USA, Afghanistan, and Pakistan considering the policies of the regional or Eurasian great powers.

AMERICA'S NEW STRATEGY AGAINST TERRORISM AND PAKISTAN

It seems the recent strategic announcements of President Donald Trump against Pakistan's double- standard policies regarding the Afghan war helped Kabul to put an end to its historical apprehension. The most expected Afghan foreign policy dream will come true if the United States really exerts pressure on Pakistan to prevent it from interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs and sponsoring terrorist groups in the region. Following this act of Trump's, Pakistan found itself in an unpredictable political situation.

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Trump pointed out: *“we no longer be silent about Pakistan’s save heavens for terrorist organizations the Taliban and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond, Pakistan has much to gain from partnering with our effort in Afghanistan and has much to lose in continuing to harbor criminals and terrorists, Pakistan has also shelter the same originations that try every single day to kill our people, we have paid Pakistan billions and billions of dollars and at the same time there housing the very terrorists that we are fighting”*.²

In addition, for the second he tweeted: *“the United States has Foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They given safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help”*³

Trump’s announcement against Pakistan was warmly welcomed by Afghan and Indian governments and politicians. It is the first time for Afghanistan and India to have a common voice with the USA towards Pakistan and terrorism in the region.

That was the only Afghan foreign policy since the 20th century to turn the West and in particular the US against Pakistan. However, if we compare America’s recent strategy to the current strategies of those regional powers that are involved in Afghanistan, we will find Afghanistan and the US in a more intricate situation. Other than India, no other large power has officially supported it yet. If something goes amiss in this stream, Afghanistan could become the stage of an even larger conflict zone. In such a situation, Afghanistan and America may find themselves helpless.

THE CASE OF THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM AMONG RUSSIA, CHINA, AND INDIA:

When Donald Trump was yet to enter office as the President of the United States, the political elite of Afghanistan was expecting that in the near future the misunderstandings between the US and the Eurasian great powers would be eliminated. America, China and Russia will stand side by side to re-approach international peace, prosperity, stability and development, and they will take common steps against terrorism and particularly the one endorsed by Pakistan. This will help Afghanistan become the center of international cooperation again and Pakistan will face regional and international isolation.

Afghanistan is a dividing and transit point between Central-Asia and South-Asia region. Recently the two regions are working on the organizing of a common and trans-regional economic and energy market. A new era of trans-regional economic and political cooperation is going to be shaped in the near future. The case of presence in Afghanistan for the United States,

² Donald Trump (Aug, 2017): Trump to Expand US Military Intervention in Afghanistan, The Guardian, Internet, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/21/donald-trump-expand-us-military-intervention-afghanistan-pakistan>, 2018. 03. 27. 00:31.

³ Donald Trump (2018-01-01): Donald Trump attacks Pakistan Claiming ‘they have given us nothing but lies and deceit’ in return for \$33bn aid, Independent, Internet, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-pakistan-tweet-lies-deceit-aid-us-president-terrorism-aid-a8136516.html>, 2018. 03. 27. 00:36.

in order to control their initiatives, maintain the balance of power, and influence between these two regions is highly significant. On the other hand, America's new strategy and presence in Afghanistan, which is also highly considered for the regional large powers, means a huge gap and an even more destructive trend for Afghan security, peace, and sustainable stability.

The structure of the relations between the countries in the region recently has lost its previous meaning as they used to have in the Cold War and post-Cold-war era. The main reason of the newly political and security initiatives applied between Eurasian nations is America's new balance of power policy towards Eurasia. This is the only reason that Pakistan's mothership of terrorism in the region has become a central debate for the United States. Pakistan is America's Major non-NATO Ally, but its regional policy efforts were recognized as a threat to the US troops in Afghanistan and to its strategy in the whole region. Pakistan's main goal is to be the only major actor in Afghanistan. Pakistan wants the US to withdraw from the country, transfer the responsibilities back to Islamabad and lead from behind.

Currently, America's new strategical shift towards India in order to make a groundbreaking step against terrorism and its supporters in the South-Asian region has not been welcome by the other two regional great powers like Russia and China. These two countries are considerably concerned about Afghanistan and US military presence in the region, because they do not have the same point of view and strategical interest related to fight terrorism.

To draw a clearer description, we should have a glance at the case meaning of the fight against terrorism among India, China and Russia, the three great powers in Eurasia.

Prime Minister Modi, during his speech at the eighth BRICS Summit in Goa, called Pakistan the "*mothership of terror*".⁴ He was mentioning cross-border terrorism or "*state-sponsored terrorism*" with regards to Pakistan. India's most important strategic effort is to isolate Pakistan regionally and globally. In 2016, India successfully encouraged Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan to boycott the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit. The Summit was scheduled to be held in Islam Abad in November 2016.

While India considers Pakistan a mothership of terrorism, China is one of the strategic and closest allies of Pakistan. China is committed to invest \$46 billion dollars in infrastructure projects in Pakistan and build the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Based on some analysis, China is not even ready to accept the allegation of sponsorship of Jihadi Groups by Pakistan.⁵ China believes that Pakistan is on the frontline of the fight against terrorism. In response to Trump's new strategic shift towards India and announcements against Pakistan, for the second time the spokesperson of China's foreign ministry officially declared:

⁴ Dr Gaurav Garg [Oct, 2016]: BRICS Summit 2016-Full Analysis & Review for UPSC / State PSC, youtube, Internet, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYZV4nhRPTY>, 2017-06-15, 23:49.

⁵ Jon Boone [Oct2016]: Narendra Modi Labels Pakistan 'mothership of terrorism', theguardian, Internet, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/16/narendra-modi-mothership-of-terrorism-pakistan-brics-go>, 2017-06-15, 22:57.

“Pakistan has made great efforts and sacrifices for combating terrorism and made prominent contributions to the cause of international counterterrorism, and the international community should fully recognize this”.⁶

On the other hand, according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov:

“The main emphasis of the new US strategy is made on settlement through the use of force and has no chance for success in Afghanistan”. Russian Foreign Minister believes it is a *“dead-end approach”*.

He also pointed out:

“I do not think that it goes in line with our joint interest for follow the negotiated, coordinated, line which is approved by the UN Security Council. But I hope that within the framework of the expert-level contacts we have with our American colleagues, we will be able to clarify this apparent contradiction”.⁷

Needless to say, even Russia is also focused on building a constructive relationship with Pakistan. Russia is trying to enjoy a better relation with Pakistan in order to establish trans-Eurasian political and economic partnership and cooperation. The very first joint military training between Russian and Pakistani military groups was carried out in Pakistan. Such a shift is considerable and significant strategic change in their relation over the history.

Pakistan has no interest in American operations, presence and influence in Afghanistan and the Russian zone of influence in Central Asia. Simultaneously, from Pakistan's point of view a closer relation and cooperation with Russia could be more fruitful than following American strategy in the region. In addition, Russia also seeks to develop its trans-Eurasian relations without the meddling influence of the USA. Russia needs Pakistan for its geopolitical influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan needs Russia's resources and geopolitical influence for solving its serious economic problems and to build a powerful geopolitical position and balance with America and India as well.

In the 109th paragraph of the eighth BRICS Summits declaration, the Islamic State, Al-Qaida's proxy, and Jabhat al-nusra is on the focus point for the member countries, mainly for Russia and China.⁸ In return, India is not interested in fighting armed groups in Syria and the Middle East. India is suffering because of the activities of those terrorist groups trained in Pakistan that target India and its regional strategic partners like Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Yes, Modi can proclaim whatever he feels suitable but there is not even one single word in the declaration about Pakistan or terrorist networks activity like Lashkar-e-taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad in the South-Asia. Therefore, in one word, the three great powers of Eurasia (Russia, India and China) must find a common point of view and a practical strategy against international terrorism and

⁶ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference (2018-01-02): Internet, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1523228.shtml, 2018-01-09, 06:39.

⁷ Sergey Lavrov [Aug, 2017]: New US strategz for Afghanistan is 'dead-end' – Lavrov, RT.com, Internet, <https://www.rt.com/news/400756-us-afghanistan-dead-end-lavrov/>, 2018-03-23, 18:10.

⁸ 8th BRICS Summit Goa Declaration: Here is the full text adapted by the member nations [Oct. 2016]: Internet, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/8th-brics-summit-go-declaration-here-is-the-full-text-adopted-by-the-member-nations/>, 2017-06-14, 14:06.

in favor of the securitization process among the region because any big power in Eurasia would like to destabilize the continent.

At the same time, according to Edwin Mora's report at Breitbart, "*Pakistani officials are expected to reach out to Islamabad's allies, namely China to take them into confidence*". He also adds, "*Especially, going to speed up the process of implementing its strategy for increasing diplomatic, trade and other relations with China, Russia and other countries*".⁹

However, the new US Strategy related to Afghanistan, Pakistan and the fight against terrorism was already predictable for Pakistan. The more now that President Trump ordered to eliminate the position of Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP), devolve Afghanistan's case to the Department of South and Central Asia of the US State Department, and concurrently, his administration was re-evaluating US military strategy in Afghanistan, discussing the way of sending several thousand more troops to the country.¹⁰ Pakistan and its security policy experts realized that Trump believes in military solutions rather than focusing on diplomatic steps to put an end to its project in Afghanistan.

Pakistan had two expectations towards the US side: the one being that the US suspend the Major non-NATO ally (MNNA) treaty and stop its economic and military aids to Pakistan, whilst the second being that the US build a new shift with India and conduct closer cooperation channel in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Pakistan also thinks the US interests and capacities in Afghanistan are facing a decreasing tendency, and currently planning to withdraw from the country, this is why America is blaming Pakistan to explain its losses.

Before President Trump declared his new strategy, Pakistan started its efforts were to shape a new and common Eurasian strategic policy option. According to Sohail Khan's article "*Russia, China, and Pakistan will have to clean up the US-Created Mess in Afghanistan*".¹¹

Such regional strategic policy options or action plans could have two meanings for Pakistan. On one hand, it shows Pakistan as a threatening power and on the other hand, raises its geopolitical value for America and other NATO member countries. In this initiative, Russia and China are in the focus point for Pakistan to shape and build a new Eurasian strategic trinity in answer to the US-India-Afghanistan military and strategic trinity. This was and still is a preventive step by Pakistan to threaten America's initiative and presence in Afghanistan. The three Eurasian countries, Russia, China, and Pakistan, have already held talks to find an alternative peaceful solution for sustainable stability in Afghanistan and in the region mainly after the withdrawal of the United States troops. Based on some reports, the representatives of the Afghan Taliban also

⁹ Edwin Mora (2017): China Defies Trump: Pakistan makes 'Great Efforts and Sacrifices' Against Terrorism, Internet, <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2018/01/02/china-defies-trump-pakistan-makes-efforts-sacrifices-against-terrorism/>, 2018-03-19, 18:23.

¹⁰ Elise Labott (2017): State Department plans to eliminate special envoy on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Internet, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/23/politics/state-department-tillerson-eliminate-envoy-afghanistan/index.html>. 2018-03-19, 19:23.

¹¹ Sohail Khan (2017): Russia, China and Pakistan Will have to Clean up the US-Created Mess in Afghanistan, Internet, <http://russia-insider.com/en/politics/russia-china-and-pakistan-will-have-clean-us-created-mess-afghanistan/ri20247> 2018-03-20, 12:29.

have attended these meetings in Pakistan as well as in Moscow. The three Eurasian countries are trying to use the Afghan Taliban against the rising Islamic State in Afghanistan.

THE US, AFGHANISTAN, AND PAKISTAN IN EURASIA FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Eurasia is one of the world's most important geopolitical and geo-economic areas. The great powers and countries here are yet to reach a common regional or Eurasian consensus in fields of fight against security and political challenges like terrorism, drug cultivation, drug smuggling, and human smuggling. Afghanistan is located at the heart of Eurasia. Therefore, it naturally plays a central role in connecting the whole region. However, considering its last forty-year political situation, it never had a positive and successful internal and foreign policy to rescue itself and keep the region secure. Today, Eurasia needs a comprehensive development process. Ideally, Russia, China, South Asian and Central Asian countries need a secure, safe, and stable Afghanistan in order to develop and carry out their trans-Eurasian and trans-regional economic projects such as TAPI, TUTAP, and CASA-1000. Nevertheless, because of two factors, Afghanistan could not create a common regional or Eurasian debate to build a policy cooperation platform in the aforementioned fields while enjoying support by the US, NATO, and its other western partners:

- The first factor is the long-term presence of the US and NATO soldiers in the country, which is not coordinated with the strategies of Eurasian great powers such as Russia and China.
- The second factor is the lack of common goals, interests and joint economic, political and security projects and action plans between Afghanistan and the Eurasian great powers in the fields of the fight against terrorism and drug smuggling in the region.

According to the standpoints of Russia, China, and India over Pakistan and terrorism in the region, only India believes Pakistan is the mothership of terror and the international community and other regional great powers should stand together and push Pakistan to put an end to its terror-supporting strategy. Conversely, for Russia and China, the Islamic State and other terrorist groups in Syria and in the Middle East are in the focus point. In one word, the efforts of India to turn the regional great powers against Pakistan could not affect Russia and China's point of view.

In the whole region, Afghanistan is the only player that always welcomes India's anti-terror and anti-Pakistan strategy, but recently the United States has also adopted a similar stance and considers it a potential power to build a threatful trinity to exert pressure on Pakistan.

The need to fight the Taliban and push them back from Afghanistan is a short-term strategy mainly for the current Afghan government. The main and long-term strategy of the Afghan government headed by Ashraf Ghani is to change the country's vulnerable and isolated economic and political position to an important and trans-regional economic transit and connecting point for South Asian and Central Asian sub-regions of Eurasia. To achieve this goal, Afghanistan, Iran, and India practically opened and developed the Chabahar Port. The port lay the ground for Afghanistan to be connected with India instead of doing trade through Pakistan. Furthermore, the Chabahar Port is a strategic opportunity for Afghanistan if it wants to bring India and its neighboring countries closer to the Central Asian Countries and markets. The Afghan government also connected its Railways to the China led One Belt and One Road (OBOR) meanwhile started working and developing the Lapis Lazuli Transit, Trade and Transport Route.

The Lapis Lazuli Transit, Trade and Transport Route agreement was ratified in 2012 by the countries of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. The text of the Lapis Lazuli agreement was finalized in November 2016 in Baku by the participants and it also constitutes a part of the Second Central Asia Regional Economic Corridor investing program supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The Lapis Lazuli Route initiative was developed to enhance regional economic integration and trade-based connectivity, and build a notably integrated transit and transport system among the contracting parties. The “Lapis Lazuli Route” is one of the historical regional trade and transit belts in the region because Afghanistan’s Lapis Lazuli and other semiprecious stones exported to the Caucasus, Russia, the Balkans, Europe and North Africa over 2000 years ago. The two important pillars of cooperation under the Lapis Lazuli Route Agreement are the provision of facilities for transit and simplification of customs procedures among the contracting parties. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor starts from Aqina in northern Faryab province and Torghundi in the western Herat province (both in Afghanistan), continues to the port of Turkmenbashi on the Caspian Sea in Turkmenistan, then continues to Baku and Tbilisi and the Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi and at the end connects to the cities of Kars and Istanbul in Turkey, at the entrance of Europe.¹²

In return, if Afghanistan could not coordinate the United States strategies with the interests and strategies of Russia and China by its active and successful diplomacy or at least not build a reliable and trustworthy bilateral and trilateral regional cooperation mechanism, the country would face with threats such as:

- Its regional position and policies will be recognized by the abovementioned regional and Eurasian great powers as the expansion of the US strategy
- The great powers of Eurasia will begin to find and build alternative economic roads and transit corridors, which presumably will bypass Afghanistan instead of placing it in the centre
- Afghanistan may lose the possibility to be the economic connecting point between South and Central Asian regions and an important transit area of the Eurasia
- Afghanistan may remain in the US-India-Afghanistan trinity over the long haul
- Russia, China, Pakistan, and Iran may find more common grounds to act against US and block Afghanistan
- Moreover, in the end of the day, Afghanistan instead of being an international cooperation centre, will remain a conflict zone and a stage of a proxy war between the US and Eurasian great and large powers

United States seeks to defend and keep its internationally leading position in Eurasia. To achieve this goal, Afghanistan is the only potent place for America to influence the whole trans-Eurasian economic cooperation and trans-regional projects such as Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline (TAPI), and Tajikistan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TUTAP) and CASA-1000 which are parts of the Central Asia-South Asia Regional Electricity Market (CASAREM) and other trans-regional initiatives.

¹² RECCA: Lapis-Lazuli Transit, Trade and Transport Route (Lapis Lazuli Corridor), Internet, http://recca.af/?page_id=2080, 2018-04-22, 18:33.

Afghanistan, in the US new strategy has become the same important and strategic place, similar to Poland in Europe. According to George Freidman “*the fundamental American interest is always the balance of power*”.¹³ Poland is a geopolitical dividing line between Russia and Germany or Eurasia and the entire Eastern Europe for America to balance its power. According to George Freidman:

*“The United States must continue to do everything it can to block a German-Russian entente and to limit the effect that Russia’s sphere of influence might have on Europe, because the very presence of a militarily powerful Russia changes the Way Europe Behaves”. Exposed on either side, Poland will have little choice but to go along with whatever the German and Russia decide, which would be disastrous for the United States. It is therefore in the American interest to guarantee Poland’s independence from Russia and Germany, not only formally but by creating a viable and vibrant Polish economy and military that can serve as the model and driver for the rest of Eastern Europe”*¹⁴

Applying Friedman’s concept to Central Asia would mean Afghanistan becoming the most important geopolitical dividing line between South and Central Asia regions in American foreign policy interest to keep its global great power position in trans-Eurasian economic cooperation and projects. According to the facts, the US will remain for an unlimited period in the country because Afghanistan’s strategic position is like a “cash cow”¹⁵ in the current US foreign policy.

According to the abovementioned facts and our point of view, the US new strategy has led to the following developments:

- The countries and the great powers of Eurasia estimate America’s long-term presence and influence in their Eurasian and regional policies
- The US will be one of the main balancing factors of Trans-Eurasian economic, political and security initiatives
- Afghanistan as the most important dividing line between South and Central Asia and has thus achieved a significantly imminent position in the US foreign policy
- For the current US government, the case of Afghanistan could be the only or the most important successful highlight in its foreign policy until the next presidential elections in America.

Further, if Afghanistan could move to build a long-term and trustable regional cooperation mechanism with Russia, China and other neighboring countries, Pakistan will have to face challenges such as:

- An active and multi-vector Afghan diplomacy will bring closer the US and regional great and large powers in Afghanistan in the fight against terrorism, drug smuggling and cooperation in trans-Eurasian economic projects and initiatives.

¹³ George Freidman (2011): *The Next Decade*, page 125, published by Doubleday, a division of Random House, New York.

¹⁴ George Freidman (2011): *The Next Decade*, page 132-134, published by Doubleday, a division of Random House, New York.

¹⁵ Becker (2017): ‘US doesn’t want Afghanistan war to end – it’s cash cow for Pentagon, contractors’, Internet, <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/400760-us-afghanistan-war-pentagon/>, 2018-01-12, 12:40.

- Pakistan will lose China's and Russia's support in the long run as well.
- Pakistan will be isolated and forced to stop supporting Taliban and terrorist groups in its territory and the region, otherwise China and Russia will support the US-India-Afghan trinity to find a realistic solution for the regional uncertainty.
- Pakistan will be under the high-level Chinese economic influence.
- In the end of the day, Pakistan will lose the capacity to keep its territorial integrity and push back Pashtun and Baloch separatist movements.

CONCLUSION

The historical armed conflicts and political disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan have arrived at a new and difficult phase. Today America, Afghanistan and India have reached a shared view as to the fight against terrorism and Taliban in the region, disregarding Pakistan. The latter, once among the most strategic partners for the West during the Cold War and post-Cold War era in the region mainly in Afghanistan, has lost its strategic position, mainly due to Pakistan's double standard policy towards America, NATO, and Kabul since 2001. Following almost two decades, America accepted Afghan and Indian lobby and recognized the fact that Pakistan could not be the key and most trusted country in terms of building a sustainable peace and economy environment, in Afghanistan and fight against terrorism in the region. This state of affairs led the countries to build the new AAI strategic trinity against Taliban, terrorist groups and networks jointly stating Pakistan is responsible supporter for all of them.

In return, Pakistan is trying to shape a new strategic Eurasian initiative siding China and Russia and even Iran in order to block America and India in Afghanistan and raise its own geopolitical value on all sides. On the other hand, Russia, because of her zone of influence and China, because of having a common border with Afghanistan are deeply concerned about the American military presence in Afghanistan. At the same time Russia and China do not share the geopolitical interests of the United States, India and Afghanistan with regards to Pakistan and the fight against terrorism.

In a word, America is yet to find a common ground with Russia and China in Afghanistan. It would be more fruitful for America to enjoy Russia's and China's support as well, otherwise it would be impossible to curb Pakistan and prevent it from manifesting its destructive behaviour.

Afghanistan should take the following steps in order to change its vulnerable geopolitical position to a valuable geo-economic and trade partner to all Eurasian great powers:

- Develop its economic and trade relations with Russia, China, India, Iran and even Turkey by implementing projects like TAPI, TUTAP, and CASA-1000 and acquire an active role providing various contributions to the connectivity initiatives like Chabahar port, OBOR, Lapis Lazuli.
- Work actively on multilateral platforms in order to bring countries like America, European Union, India, Russia, and China closer in case of Afghanistan and being involved in its affairs in a constructive manner.
- In addition, actively cooperate, coordinate and even initiate new regional platforms with Russia, China, India, and Iran in order to efficiently fight terrorism, drug cultivating, drug and human smuggling. These are vital if the country is to be considered a constructive partner in the region.

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