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## Central Asia and Afghanistan



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## **Kazakhstan Journal of Foreign Studies**

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# FOREWORD



**Talgat  
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*Special  
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for  
Afghanistan*

After the dramatic events of August 2021, Afghanistan entered a new era in its history. Almost semi-centennial civil war has ended, which claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands Afghans and forced millions to leave their country. The withdrawal of Western coalition from Afghanistan after a ten-year stay and Taliban's takeover have become milestone events of present time.

Indeed, the events in Afghanistan before and after the August events had and still have a significant impact on the priorities of regional security. The situation in Afghanistan has always been considered as the main threat to stability in Central and South Asia. Many major infrastructure projects involving Afghanistan have been put on pause. Presence of foreign terrorists organizations included in the list of banned by the UN and a number of states on the territory of the country was of particular concern to the countries of the region and beyond.

Kazakhstan initially advocated the process of national reconciliation, the creation of a sustainable dialogue between the parties to the conflict under UN auspices. The position of our country has been expressed repeatedly on various international platforms, brought to the attention of foreign partners. Guided by the principles of humanism, in 2008 the Republic of Kazakhstan allocated significant funds for the education of 1,000 Afghan students in the country's universities. Since 2019, with the assistance of the European Union and the UN Development Program, 50 female students from Afghanistan have been enrolled in Kazakh universities annually. The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan also allocates quotas for Afghan students.

The economy of Afghanistan has suffered enormous damage due to the fighting. The threat of mass starvation has repeatedly hang over the country. Kazakhstan, being a responsible member of the world community, has provided and is providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. Only in 2020–2021, the total amount of assistance was about \$100 million. The bulk of the aid consisted of supplies of flour, other types of food and medicines. Kazakhstan accounts for significant share of grain and flour for Afghanistan purchased through the UN World Food Program.

Regarding the future of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan's position is in tune with the opinion of the UN and the world community. We want to see a peaceful, prosperous Afghanistan in which all peoples and ethnic groups live in harmony, a country free from violence, terrorism and drug trafficking, a kind and reliable neighbor in the region.

# AFGHANISTAN AND TALIBAN:

## FROM MODERNISM TO ARCHAICISM, FROM RESISTANCE TO RECOGNITION?



### **Sultan Akimbekov**

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### ABSTRACT

The article discusses in detail the issues related to the transformation of the situation in Afghanistan in the context of the withdrawal of American troops. The author analyzes the motives for departure of the United States, and also notes the emerging trends towards "changing the policy of the conditional West in relation to the equally conditional East." It is emphasized that the evolving situation around Afghanistan is complicated by the ongoing geopolitical rivalry in the region, where, we can observe not only the interests of major powers but also the interests of new serious players from among active regional states. The research paper also examines the contrast between two models of state and social development in Afghanistan, on the one hand, the one that the United States and its allies have been promoting for 20 years, and, on the other hand, the one that the Taliban movement is implementing today.

### KEYWORDS

Afghanistan, Taliban, USA, Salafism, consensus, transport corridors.



## INTRODUCTION

The events in Afghanistan that took place in the summer of 2021 due to Taliban's takeover resulted in the most extensive change in the situation in this country since the entry of troops of the international coalition in the fall of 2001. Of course, for Afghanistan, the withdrawal of US troops and its allies and Taliban's takeover mean drastic changes in its development model.

In fact, we are talking about the completion of the state-building project that the Western allies have been trying to implement in Afghanistan for twenty years. On the other hand, this project, undoubtedly, to a certain extent was part of the general ideology of innovation policy, which was proposed by the countries of the

conditional West for the transformation of those states and societies that were beyond its traditional influence. In this context, the significance of the very fact of the withdrawal of the Western coalition from Afghanistan goes beyond the situation only in this particular country. In general, in connection with the rejection of the project in Afghanistan, we can talk about the emerging trend towards changing the policy of the conditional West in relation to the equally conditional East.

At the same time, it may seem that the development of the situation in Afghanistan cannot reflect the general trend of changing the policy of USA in the East. From the American point of view, this may look like a very special and very difficult case. Therefore, such a rapid withdrawal of the United States with the rejection of any transition period can be considered as an indicator of the exclusivity of the Afghan situation.

"The political component of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan theoretically should have been related to securing the positions of the government they previously supported. Like it was during the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 or the withdrawal of the Americans from South Vietnam in 1973. This was necessary, at least, to preserve the face of a great power, so that the departure did not look like a defeat. Therefore, a couple of years are needed in such cases, when a loyal regime seems to exist by itself with the help of advisers and maintaining funding.

However, Afghan “communities perceive democratic elections exclusively through the prism of their group interests.”

Only then we can say that the regime turned out to be weak, could not resist. The main thing is that the fall of the regime should not be directly connected with the withdrawal of the troops of the great power. But in our case, Biden already in mid-August said that this Afghan government was dysfunctional. He said that the task of the Americans in Afghanistan was to eliminate terrorists who struck the United States in 2001, and the United States had no task to build a state there” [1].

In this regard, the failure to reform Afghanistan can theoretically be due to the specifics of this country with institutions suffering from serious external and internal pressure for more than 40 years, at least since the April revolution of 1978. In addition, most of the time, Afghanistan was actually in the very center of the confrontation within the framework of the Cold War between the USSR and the United States, which undoubtedly affected the nature of such pressure.

Moreover, even today the development of the situation around Afghanistan is complicated by the ongoing geopolitical rivalry in the region. This rivalry involves not only the great powers – the USA, China and Russia, but also new serious players from among the large and very active regional states which have their own interests. Such States today include Iran, Pakistan, India, Uzbekistan, Turkey and the Arab States of the Persian Gulf. Of course, this gives the geopolitics of the region a more complex configuration than the one that took place during the Cold War.

Therefore, basically, the United States may well justify its decision to leave Afghanistan by the specifics of the situation in this country and the complex structure of geopolitical interests around it. Nevertheless, the scale of the attempt made by the countries of the Western coalition to reform Afghanistan using their own experience of state-building suggests that initially in this country it was not only about issues of geopolitics.

In fact, in Afghanistan, the United States and its allies have made the most ambitious and expensive attempt to transform Eastern society into a more modern state and society. They proceeded from the assumption that representative democracy and the creation of State-wide institutions in the situation of the division of Afghan society into many competing ethnic, religious and tribal communities would allow them to stabilize the situation in this country and create a stable state system. However, “Afghan communities perceive democratic elections exclusively through the prism of their group interests. Under conditions of general distrust between the communities, elections are considered not as a competition of ideas for the common good of society, customary for Western countries, but in the context of a very tough struggle with opponents, where there



are necessarily winners and losers. Of course, no one wants to be a loser. And this leads to large-scale inter-communal competition" [2, 764 p.].

It is clear that in this context, the actual consent of the United States to the transfer of power to representatives of the religious Taliban movement, with its very archaic idea of organization of the state and society, should undoubtedly be considered as recognition of the obvious failure of this project. Accordingly, the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan actually means an exit from this very problematic project for the United States. With such posing the question, the economy of resources, material, financial, and human, comes to the fore.

In general, for the United States, this demonstrates the obvious priority of real policy, even with the possibility of damaging ideology. Consequently, this can be seen as a systemic change in Western policy. Because ideology is the most important thing for justifying any policy of change in other states and societies. As to great powers, this very often serves as a justification for geopolitics. This was especially significant during the Cold War, when the geopolitical contradictions between the two blocs, led by the United States and the USSR, in the territories disputed by each other, were based, among other things, on issues of ideology.

In this context, the entry of the United States in Afghanistan in 2001, as well as their active intervention in Iraq that took place in parallel, were a consequence of the ideological concept formed after the end of the Cold War regarding the existence of a fundamental possibility for the transformation of typically Eastern states and societies into more acceptable forms of state systems for the West. But it is important to note that this was precisely an ideological concept, which largely came from the experience of the transformation of former communist bloc countries after its collapse in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In a certain sense, this ideological concept was expressed in Francis Fukuyama's famous essay "The End of History?" published in 1989. In 1992, based on the ideas outlined in it, he published the book "The End of History and the Last Man." In his works, Fukuyama declared the spread of liberal democracy in the world and the end of the era of confrontation based on ideology in this regard.

In this context, the withdrawal of the United States and international coalition countries from Afghanistan, in fact, meant a transition to a more pragmatic policy. Therefore, the events in Afghanistan that took place in August 2021 can be considered as the rejection of an ideological approach towards this country. Meanwhile, this gives grounds to critics of US policy and representatives of states competing with them in the field of geopolitics to assess the circumstances as a tendency to reduce American influence in the strategically important region of Asia located around Afghanistan.

However, the specifics of the current situation is that moving away from the ideological component does not mean abandoning geopolitics at all. Moreover, it is possible that ideology was the bottleneck of American policy in the region around Afghanistan. It required too many expenses from the United States, not only material and human, but also, which may be especially important, image. The latter circumstance was of particular importance. The presence of US troops



in a Muslim country, the measures taken by them to suppress the resistance encountered, attempts to change the prevailing local rules of the game did not have a very positive effect on the image of the United States inside Afghanistan and met with criticism in the Muslim world.

It can be assumed that without an ideological component, for the United States, focusing on issues of geopolitics may even be more effective, at least it will definitely become less costly. Obviously, in the current situation with economic changes in the world associated with the spread of isolationist sentiments and the crisis of globalization, cost reduction is important for American interests.

Actually, from this point of view, the events that took place in Afghanistan in 2021 can be considered in terms of the transition from ideology to real policy. This means that the United States concentrates more on solving geopolitical problems without having to adjust them depending on the ideology of the issue related to the task of transforming Afghanistan into a more modern state with a representative democracy. Therefore, in this context, the circumstances of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent coming to power of the Taliban movement, it is still worth placing more emphasis on how this will affect the geopolitics of the region.

Although, of course, the coming of such a religious movement as the Taliban to power in a particular country cannot but raise serious questions about the prospects for the development of this country and the impact on the situation in neighboring Asia. Moreover, in this case we are talking about an obvious trend towards the archaization of the social and state structure of Afghanistan that has emerged in this regard.

It is this circumstance that is particularly painfully perceived in world public opinion against the background of the previous modernization policy, which the United States and the international coalition tried to implement in this country. The rapid fall of the Afghan government, which was associated with a twenty-year period of external governance by the United States and its allies, cannot but raise questions about the United States itself in connection with the circumstances of their withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the viability of the model they implemented in this country.

Since August 2021, state-building in this country has been guided by a fundamentally different model associated with a much greater role of religion in

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the organization of the state and society. Such a change in the development model from one that is oriented towards modernism to one that is obviously more archaic can have significant consequences. Moreover, not only for Afghanistan itself, but also for the entire region.

In fact, for the first time, supporters of the Deobandian trend in Islam came to power in a one particular country. In modern Islam, they belong to those political movements that adhere to the concept of returning to the values of the earlier model of the organization of the Islamic community. In particular, one of these movements are representatives of different schools of

thought within the framework of Salafism, which is widespread in some Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. For example, the fringe group of the Salafists was responsible for the ideology of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, while moderate Salafists represent power in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait.

One of the characteristic features of Salafism is that they oppose the sin of polytheism (shirk) in the context of the struggle against the cult of saints. In particular, in Afghanistan and neighboring countries, including Central Asia, in this context, Salafists oppose the cult of local saints. In addition, the radical part of the Salafists opposes the Sunni madhhabs, claiming that they did not exist in the original Islamic community.

At the same time, the Deobandi trend in Islam differs from the Salafis in its own understanding of the principles of the organization of the state and society. The deobands also call for a return to the principles of the original Muslim community, but only at a time in its history when the secular and spiritual principles of governance are a single whole. This approach makes it possible not to exclude madhhabs, but also to some extent to allow the existence of a local tradition (in particular, the mentioned worship of the graves of local saints).

But since the understanding of the supporters of the Deobandian version of Islam is based on unity of spiritual and secular principles, this means that the state or the Muslim community (which at the early stage of the formation of Islam was a single whole) should be governed by religious figures. This idea lies in corresponding religious titles of the leaders of the Taliban movement, for example, Mullah Baradar or Maulavi Akhunzada.

Although it is worth noting that students in numerous madrassas in the areas of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan did not receive a full-fledged religious education. Instead, they were given certificates without a name, which were not recognized anywhere. "Therefore, the entire mass of madrasah graduates received

primary knowledge about Islam, but could not occupy appropriate positions in the usual religious system... Nevertheless, they called themselves Mullahs, which turned the Taliban into a theocratic state" [2, 487 p.].

In any case, we are talking about an attempt to implement a very archaic model of state and public organization in Afghanistan, which is a serious challenge both for this country and for its neighbors. In particular, because a precedent has been set for the transfer of power to a religious organization, which, moreover, comes from a local cultural and religious tradition common to Afghanistan with the Central Asian region and Pakistan. In this way, it differs from another radical religious organization of the Islamic State, which proceeds from the ideology of Salafism. Accordingly, from an ideological point of view, the Taliban movement is more adaptable to local conditions than the Salafist ideology introduced from the countries of the Arab East.

But in any case, from the Western point of view, the religious model of the state and social structure in Afghanistan looks clearly archaic. As a result, the contrast between the two models of state and social development in Afghanistan, on the one hand, the one that the United States and its allies have been promoting for 20 years, and, on the other hand, the one that the Taliban movement is implementing today, turned out to be too significant, and the transition from one to the other is too painful, first of all for the part of Afghan society that is focused on modernization and for public opinion of countries of the conditional West. The very fact of the transition from modernization to archaization is so inconsistent with the ideas of general progress that it cannot but make a shocking impression on Western public opinion.

A certain paradox of the situation lies in the fact that the changes that took place in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, such as transition from modernization to archaization, in fact, are a reflection of real policy. It was mentioned above that this was typical for the USA. In addition, the events in Afghanistan demonstrated that the main and most active players in the geopolitical arena of the region were quite ready, if not for the recognition of the Taliban movement, then for varying degrees of interaction with Taliban. This was clearly demonstrated in the summer of 2021, when, right on the eve of the fall of the government of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the leading world and regional powers maintained active contacts at various levels with representatives of the Taliban movement.

In this context, the fact that a number of high-ranking officials from the United States, Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia and a number of other countries met with representatives of Taliban on the eve of the Taliban occupation of Kabul in August 2021, de facto contributed to the legalization of the very possibility of the Taliban coming to power. This indicates the relatively broad international consensus between different sides of the geopolitical rivalry in the region around Afghanistan about the possibility of the Taliban coming to power in this country.

At the same time, the question arises how such a consensus became possible at all, taking into account all the existing contradictions between the USA, as well as Iran, China and Russia. However, for all these countries, "everything looked like

an almost crushing defeat of the United States in one of the strategically important regions. Of course, for Iran, China and Russia, this option looked quite attractive given their complicated relations with the USA. The US withdrawal meant that these countries would no longer have to worry about their presence in the region. In addition, if the Americans are leaving Afghanistan and if this is a sign of their abandonment of the previous policy, then for China, Iran and Russia it may mean that in other areas the United States may also come to agreements with them" [3].

In particular, the issue of the possibility of resuming the nuclear deal between the United States and Iran is on the agenda today. Therefore, for Iran, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was more important than the possible risks for the Shiite minority in this country. In this situation, Iran clearly did not need a new front in the Afghan direction. It is obvious that its appearance would have been inevitable if Tehran had opposed the coming of the Taliban movement to power and started supporting Shiites in Afghanistan. It was much more profitable to take part in the formation of the above-mentioned international consensus, which, among other things, was supposed to provide certain guarantees, including for the Afghan Shiites.

If we agree with this statement of the question, then it becomes obvious that Ashraf Ghani's government had no special options to stay in power. In this case, international consensus was very important. Because, historically, if there are serious contradictions between the main players on the foreign policy arena around Afghanistan, then an acute internal political conflict may begin inside this country. In this case, the opposing parties will enjoy the support of competing external powers. Examples include the confrontation in Afghanistan between the USSR, the USA, China and other countries in 1978–1992 during the Cold War. But we can also recall the conflict over Afghanistan between 1994 and 2001. In the latter case, Iran and Russia supported the Northern Anti-Taliban Alliance, which opposed the Taliban movement, which enjoyed support from Pakistan and a number of Arab states.

In this context, it is obvious that such an unexpectedly rapid rise of the Taliban to power would have been impossible without the factor of an impressive foreign policy consensus. Because otherwise, the Taliban could face resistance not so much from the Afghan army and security forces, but from armed formations of national minorities.

Although an attempt of resistance was made in Panjshir province under the leadership of the Tajik commander Ahmad Masud, the son of Ahmad Shah Masud, who was the leader of the Northern Anti-Taliban Alliance until his death in 2001. But, nevertheless, this attempt failed and, importantly until the beginning of 2022, we do not see the prerequisites for organizing serious resistance to the Taliban movement, despite the serious discontent of the same national minorities.

Actually, the key reason for this is the lack of external support, which was critically important for the anti-Taliban resistance during the period from 1996 to 2001. It is also specific that the ethnic Tajik Masud, as well as another prominent Afghan politician Tajik Amrullah Saleh (who was the vice-president of

IN THIS CONTEXT, IT IS OBVIOUS THAT SUCH AN UNEXPECTEDLY RAPID RISE OF THE TALIBAN TO POWER WOULD HAVE BEEN IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT THE FACTOR OF AN IMPRESSIVE FOREIGN POLICY CONSENSUS.

Afghanistan) tried to rely mainly on the local Tajik community. However, the organization of resistance failed. This is despite the fact that Tajiks have been widely represented in the army and security forces of Afghanistan since 2001. In addition, neighboring Tajikistan was one of the few states that opposed the Taliban coming to power.

If we take into account that Afghan Tajiks densely inhabit the northeastern provinces of Afghanistan bordering Tajikistan, and this was the main factor in the stability of the Northern Anti-Taliban Alliance until 2001, then theoretically it could give the impression that Masoud and Saleh could, in principle, organize resistance to the Taliban. However, despite the historically close ties of the Tajikistan with the Afghan Tajiks, as well as the experience of supporting the Northern Anti-Taliban Alliance from 1996 to 2001, Dushanbe did not have the opportunity to independently make a decision that could change the balance of power inside Afghanistan. Because the Tajik leadership had to take into account the opinions of China and Russia. Accordingly, despite all disagreement with the formed international consensus on the issue of the Taliban coming to power, Tajikistan could not ignore it.

But this does not mean that such a consensus cannot change in principle. Because circumstances may change that are associated with geopolitical contradictions in the region, both at the global and regional levels. At the global level, there is a serious aggravation of relations between the great powers today. The United States and its allies are in a state of confrontation on issues of geopolitics and geo-economics, with both Russia and China.

This does not yet return the situation to the times of the Cold War, but it can contribute to this, especially in the medium term. However, it is still unlikely that this will affect the area around Afghanistan. Here the interests of the great powers intersect to a lesser extent than in other areas. For example, Eastern Europe, which is important for Russia in its relations with the West, or Southeast Asia, where the interests of China and the United States and its allies collide.

But more important is the fact that the interests of regional forces such as Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, and Arab countries are playing an increasingly significant role in the geopolitics of the large region around Afghanistan today. They may be in fairly close relations with certain great powers, depend on their economic support, but at the same time, it is their interests that are gradually beginning to determine the geopolitical map of the region more and more often.

In this context, it is very significant that in the events of the summer of 2021, which brought the Taliban movement to power, the regional powers actually played a key role in a number of moments, of course, with the interested participation of the great powers. One of these moments was connected, in fact, with the process of transition of power to the Taliban movement in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. Because with any foreign policy consensus, there is always a practical side to the issue.

In the case of Afghanistan in August 2021, the key point was how various external players would interact with the Taliban on an ongoing basis, how such interaction would be carried out and who would be responsible for interaction? Otherwise, events inside Afghanistan could become uncontrollable, which would lead to complications that are undesirable for different countries.

In particular, if the Taliban had begun to follow their practices exercised during their stay in power in 1996–2001, then first of all they could have been expected to take tough actions against the Hazara Shiites. Obviously, this could not but worry Iran. Accordingly, Tehran could theoretically support the anti-Taliban resistance, which would immediately change the situation inside this country.

Another problem was radical religious groups that were in Afghanistan under the former rule of the Taliban. Of course, this aspect could not but worry both the United States and China. Moreover, as mentioned above, American President Joe Biden in August 2021 stated that the main task of the United States in Afghanistan was to eliminate terrorists who struck New York in 2001, and the United States did not have the task to build state there.

It is clear that if, as a result of the Taliban coming to power, Afghanistan would again become a base for extremely radical organizations, this would at least disavow Biden's words. Because the situation in Afghanistan would have returned to its original position – in the period before September 2001 – and then all the efforts made were in vain. The situation is similar with China, which, in principle, cannot help but worry about the potential radical religious organizations of an anti-Chinese orientation appearing at its western borders.

Therefore, the above-mentioned international consensus on the possibility of the Taliban coming to power could not happen without certain guarantees. Hence the question arises, who could, in principle, guarantee a relatively moderate, compared to past experience, behavior of the Taliban movement in the governance of Afghanistan? Actually, the only possible candidate for such a role out of all the states that had something to do with Afghanistan was Pakistan with its developed military-political and religious system, which once already contributed to the Taliban's coming to power in the mid-1990s.

In this sense, "Pakistan is a very convenient candidate for the role of responsible for the Taliban, and this is even regardless of its participation in the creation of this organization in 1994. *Firstly*, Pakistanis have long-standing relations with both the United States and China. *Secondly*, there are enough people and organizations in Pakistan with radical views on religion, but the army and special services of this country control them and keep them within acceptable limits. *Thirdly*, Pakistan has been interested in opening transport corridors to Central Asia since the early 1990s. This is very important for Pakistan, because Pakistan's relations with India remain very tense. If the Taliban ensures order, even if it is very strict, it will clearly ensure the implementation of all projects. For example, the construction of a railway from Uzbek Termez to Pakistani Peshawar or the construction of TAPI (Trans-Afghan gas pipeline) from Turkmenistan to

Pakistan... Therefore, Pakistan has actually become the main steward of the situation in Afghanistan. Now Islamabad is responsible for: – security of other countries, which worries the Central Asian countries, China and Russia; – the behavior of the Taliban against women, which worries Western countries; and – religious minorities, which is a matter of concern for Iran” [3].

In general, only Pakistan in the region can influence the Taliban movement, and has the necessary experience of interacting with Taliban. Although there is a radical movement “Tehreek-i-Taliban” in Pakistan, which is at war against the Pakistani authorities, but at the same time there is a religious party “Jamiat-i Ulema-i Islami” affiliated to Deobandi movement in Islam. During the years of the Taliban’s first coming to power in 1994–2001, it was this party and religious educational institutions close to it in the Pashtun regions of Pakistan that carried out large-scale support for the Taliban in Afghanistan.

In this case, it is important that Pakistan has always played the role of a kind of assistance area, which provided military, material, financial and ideological assistance for Taliban. This was not always associated with direct state assistance, more often with its informal manifestations. For example, during the period from 1994 to 2001, religious institutions from Pakistan close to the Jamiat-i Ulema-i Islami party provided a constant influx of Pashtun volunteers to replenish the military forces of the Taliban movement. This circumstance gave reason to believe that Islamabad still has significant opportunities to ensure relatively acceptable behavior of the Taliban movement.

In this regard, the example of the advice that the former chief of the General Staff of the Pakistani army, Ashraf Kiyani, gave to US representatives on the issue of their formation of the regular army of Afghanistan is representative. He advised against investing in the construction of the Afghan army, warning that “you will fail. Then you will leave, and this half-trained army will be divided into militias, which will be a problem for Pakistan” [4].

First of all, he meant the formation of northern national minorities – Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras. After the fall of the pro-communist regime of Najibullah, the military formations of the former Afghan army, together with detachments of the Mujahideen opposing it, formed militias of national minorities. It was in the 1990s that Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara militias with significant number of staff and weapon actually prevented the predominantly Pashtun Taliban movement from finally coming to power in Afghanistan in 1994–2001.

In this regard, it is very significant that in 2021 the Taliban did not meet such obstacles. There is no doubt that the rapid rise of the Taliban to power, the capitulation of the government army and the absence, in this regard, of a military confrontation, played a certain role in the relative moderation that representatives of the Taliban movement are showing in Afghanistan today. If they had met serious resistance from the national formations of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, then, most likely, there would have been a restoration of the situation that took place in the late 1990s, when the Northern Anti-Taliban Alliance existed. It is clear that this would lead to mutual bitterness of the belligerents and related excesses.



However, what can be more important is that such development of events would make it impossible to implement projects to create transport corridors, which are among the important priorities for regional countries, primarily Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Therefore, these States should have been interested in the stability of the political power in Afghanistan, which could guarantee the construction of the Trans-Afghan gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan, the railway from Uzbekistan to Pakistan, as well as power lines.

In July 2021, a month before the Taliban movement came to power, a very representative conference was held in Uzbekistan on the interconnectedness of

**Therefore, Pakistan has actually become the main steward of the situation in Afghanistan.**

the regions of Central and South Asia. The participation of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan was very significant. An article published in the Uzbek Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies stated: "...The conference participants agreed that the countries of this vast region (Central and South Asia – author's note) today have the opportunity to resume trade, as well as economic, cultural and scientific ties that have been implemented for several millennia through a safe corridor in Afghanistan" [5].



It is obvious that for the implementation of any economic interaction through the territory of Afghanistan, the issue of ensuring security is of key importance. Therefore, it is possible that there's a rationale to that this was the focus during

the conference in the capital of Uzbekistan, which took place on the eve of the fall of President Ghani's government in Afghanistan and the coming of the Taliban movement to power.

After the Taliban came to power, the construction of TAPI became one of their main priorities. In particular, in January–February 2022, active consultations were held between representatives of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan on the start of the implementation of this project. At the same time, the Asian Development Bank acts as the lead coordinator of the TAPI construction project, the cost of the first phase of which can range from 5 to 6 billion dollars [6]. At the same time, Russia "did not interfere with the supply of pipes for the Turkmen segment of the production of the Chelyabinsk Pipe Rolling Plant" [7].

It is clear that in the case of Afghanistan, the main issue is related to ensuring security along the pipeline construction route. In this regard, it is characteristic that on January 17, 2022, the representative of the Taliban, Bilal Karimi, announced plans to create a special unit of 30,000 people to control the situation in all parts of those provinces of Afghanistan where the construction of the gas pipeline will take place [8].

If we agree that there was a certain international consensus on the possibility of the Taliban coming to power in Afghanistan, then it proceeded mainly from the fact that they would be able to ensure order in this country. In turn, this will make it possible to implement all those projects that are planned in the context of economic cooperation between Central and South Asia and the gradual connection of the larger economies China, India and Russia. Accordingly, the revenues from these projects should lead to the relative economic sustainability of the Afghan Government. This will lead the Taliban to the need to engage in state-building, which should reduce their level of radicalism. At the same time, Pakistan will play the role of the force that will be able to influence the Taliban.

Although, of course, it is important to emphasize that the situation may change. In particular, it is worth paying attention to some complications that took place in January in the relations of the Taliban movement with Pakistan and Uzbekistan. On January 11, 2022, the acting Defense Minister of the Taliban, Mohammad Yakub, demanded that Uzbekistan return the planes and helicopters that flew to this country at the time of the fall of the government of Ashraf Ghani. On January 12, there was a 60% reduction in electricity supplies from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan [7]. Then the supplies were resumed.

Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Stanikzai stated that the issue of passing the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan along the Durand line is a matter of the nation, not the government [9]. This statement is very representative given the role that Pakistan is supposed to play in ensuring relatively acceptable behavior of the Taliban. It is critically important for Pakistani politics that the issue of the Durand Line as the border between the two countries is not raised in Afghanistan. Previously, the Taliban did not focus much attention on this issue. It is likely that in this way they want to emphasize their independence so that they are not perceived as a political force dependent on Pakistan.

Due to the fact that Pakistan and Uzbekistan are most interested in creating transport corridors through Afghanistan, such information attacks by high-ranking representatives of the Taliban may cause concern about the behavior of the new Afghan authorities. Because this raises the question of the possibility of influencing them by the international community. It is obvious that Pakistan and Uzbekistan play a very significant role in this. But still, it can be assumed that what happened is not a system. Rather, it is related to the internal tasks of Afghan policy. The Taliban need to secure their power and influence inside Afghanistan. Therefore, they should look independent. But in general, the international consensus, which actually ensured the Taliban's coming to power in the summer of 2021, still retains its significance.

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# BETWEEN STRATEGIC AND MATERIAL INTERESTS:

## KAZAKHSTAN AS A STABILITY PROVIDER IN AFGHANISTAN



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### ABSTRACT

The article elucidates Kazakhstan's relations with Afghanistan and illustrates how it acts as a humanitarian aid and stability provider in this war-torn country. Initially, Kazakhstan's support, stability provision and connectivity ambitions are portrayed. Further, its contributions to conflict resolution, mediation and confidence-building in the country are depicted. It is argued that Kazakhstan's attitude towards Afghanistan displays a combination of humanitarian, strategic and material objectives which are difficult to disentangle. Given its significant wealth allows Kazakhstan as a middle power to somewhat shape its environment and contribute to strengthening stability and security in Central Asia and beyond – including Afghanistan. Ultimately, however, engaging the Taliban government, facilitating sustainable development, and devising and implementing infrastructure projects linking Afghanistan with its northern neighbors, will only succeed with concerted effort of all the Central Asian countries, which may also serve as a catalyst for intra-Central Asian cooperation.

### KEY WORDS

Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, humanitarian aid, agriculture, connectivity, regional cooperation.

## INTRODUCTION

This article depicts Kazakhstan's relations with Afghanistan and illustrates how it acts as a humanitarian aid and stability provider in this war-torn country, which represents a source of transnational challenges such as extremist forces, refugees and drug trafficking. These have a potential to spill over into Central Asia comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The regaining of power of the Taliban in August 2021 has instilled a sense of uncertainty among external actors. Yet Kazakhstan sees the country not only as a source of instability but also of opportunities.

Since its independence in 1991 it conducts an active foreign policy with a significant degree of leadership ambition – both in Central Asia and beyond [1]. As a successful economy in the post-Soviet space it can afford doing so, having transitioned in less than two decades from lower-middle-income to upper-middle-income status. Kazakhstan's rapidly growing GDP now dwarfs that of the other Central Asian states. As a middle power with considerable economic pull it wields regional and extra-regional leverage. During the 2010s it changed from being a recipient of international development aid to becoming a donor country. It has thus far spent roughly \$500 million. development assistance to other countries [2]. In 2020 it established the Kazakhstan Agency of International Development (KazAID), more visibly marking its turn from a consumer to a provider of assistance to countries in greater need. Regarding Afghanistan, it has long been the greatest aid contributor among the five Central Asian states.

As will be shown in greater detail below, Kazakhstan's strong commitment to Afghanistan does not come without material interests, however. Its foreign policy behavior towards the latter contains humanitarian, strategic and material objectives in a sense of mixed motives which account for its overall conduct. During the deployment of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from 2001 to 2014 it retained substantial benefits from fees for air and land transit and cargo services. As a pastoral country being one of the world's top 10 wheat and flour exporters, its considerable potential for the provision of agricultural products meets well with the vast needs of nearly 40 million. people further south. In fact, Afghanistan thus far imports roughly half of all Kazakh flour exports, resulting in a significant degree of mutual dependence. There are also export and investment interests beyond agriculture in a country representing a huge basis for long-term foreign investment and infrastructure expansion, more generally. Not sharing a border with Afghanistan, their trade volume ranks only second among the Central Asian states, whereas Uzbekistan takes the lead in this regard. Yet Kazakh-Afghan trade turnover is still substantial, has significantly grown during the past years (despite a decline after the Taliban took power), so Kazakhstan also exhibits strong trade and investment interests and envisions accompanying infrastructure projects. It – and other Central Asian countries – supports Afghanistan's integration into the expanding regional network of trade, energy and transport links [3]. Against this backdrop, "Wider Central Asia" has become a buzzword for many practitioners, observers and international institutions for depicting Central

Asia *together* with Afghanistan, with a view to unplugging their potential for mutual cooperation. Water and electricity are two examples where collaboration could bring significant mutual benefits [4].

There have long been interconnected relationships between the two areas. Especially Northern Afghanistan and parts of what is now considered Central Asia share a common history with strong ethnic, cultural and economic ties. Its roots date back to the Bronze Age when, on the upper Amu Darya river, the first civilization with urban sites was established in this area, referred to as the Oxus Civilization [5]. Only in the 18th century AC did the broader area begin to crumble as the Russian Tsarist and British colonial empires began to surface and engaged in a Great Game over control of Afghanistan and Central Asia, more generally. After the Bolshevik revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union, tens of thousands of citizens of the emerging five Soviet Republics fled the Civil War and Soviet collectivization and took refuge in the Afghan confederation with their Tajik, Hazara, and Pushtun tribes and principalities. Although the majority were Turkmens and Uzbeks, ethnic Kazakhs were also among the refugees. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, military personnel from the Central Asian Soviet republics were given a major role to help uphold the pro-Soviet Afghan government under Mohammad Najibullah [6, p. 6]. Although in the pertinent scholarship Afghanistan is overwhelmingly not considered a part of Central Asia, occasionally scholars do point to ties so strong that they suggest this geographic label to embrace the country [7, p. 34]. Some refer to alternative markers for depicting both areas, such as the aforementioned “Wider Central Asia”, but also “Greater Central Asia” [8]. In practical politics, specifically the Uzbek government wishes to subsume Afghanistan under this label [9, p. 70].

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section portrays Kazakh-Afghan relations starting in 1991, when Kazakhstan gained its independence. The subsequent depicts Kazakhstan’s support, stability provision and connectivity ambitions regarding Afghanistan, also pointing to related material interests. The penultimate section describes Kazakhstan’s contributions to conflict resolution, mediation and confidence-building in the country, while the last sums up.

## KAZAKH-AFGHAN RELATIONS

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, bilateral relations between the newly independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan which since November 1992 labeled themselves “Central Asia” on the one side, and Afghanistan on the other, developed only slowly. The Afghan Civil War which raged after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 until April

Yet Kazakh-Afghan trade turnover is still substantial, has significantly grown during the past years (despite a decline after the Taliban took power), so Kazakhstan also exhibits strong trade and investment interests and envisions accompanying infrastructure projects.

1992 had precluded any significant interregional trade. Diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and Afghanistan were established on February 12, 1992. The subsequent year, Afghanistan opened an Embassy in Kazakhstan. The latter established a diplomatic mission in Kabul in 2003, the following year to be transformed into an Embassy<sup>1</sup>. Until 1996 Central Asian support was given to the Northern Alliance who fought the Taliban, an Islamist group that took hold since late 1994 and increasingly seized control. When it started governing the country in 1996, diplomatic and commercial relations turned sour – with the exception of Turkmenistan which traded gas, electricity and food with the Taliban [6, p. 6–7].

Since 2002 after NATO's ISAF became effective, international donors active in Afghanistan stressed the need to increase trade with the Central Asian countries, and Kazakhstan capitalized on this plea. In 2004, an agreement on the foundations of relations and cooperation was signed between the two states which covers a wide range of fields, including trade, education and the fight against illicit drugs [10, p. 219]. During the same year, first Kazakhstani companies opened offices in Afghanistan<sup>2</sup>. With its first meeting 2007 in then Astana, the Kazakh-Afghan Intergovernmental Commission for Trade and Economic Cooperation was set up to promote trade, economic and humanitarian cooperation. To boost Kazakh investment in the country, in 2012 a Treaty on the Encouragement and Reciprocal Protection of Investments was signed<sup>3</sup>. At the occasion of a visit of the President of Afghanistan, Mohammad Ghani, in Astana in November 2015, two bilateral agreements on culture<sup>4</sup> and on civil defense, prevention and emergency response<sup>5</sup> were signed. At this meeting Kazakhstan also agreed to supply more than 600 thousand tons of wheat in bilateral relations. The fight against illegal drug trafficking and terrorism figured prominently as challenges to be tackled<sup>6</sup>. Regarding Kazakh business opportunities, for instance, the Kazakh company INTEGRA won a tender to construct the Khaf (Iran) – Herat (Afghanistan) railway section<sup>7</sup>. In 2015 then Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev particularly mentioned investment opportunities for Kazakh mining companies in exploiting

<sup>1</sup> Brief characteristic of Kazakhstan-Afghanistan diplomatic relations, // [http://e-history.kz/media/upload/206\\_5/2014/06/27/3212f6574003562bc960599c064f94de.pdf](http://e-history.kz/media/upload/206_5/2014/06/27/3212f6574003562bc960599c064f94de.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Verkhoturourov Krepkoe partnerstvo Kazahstana i Afganistana [Strong partnership between Kazakhstan and Afghani-stan. July 16, 2007], // <http://expertonline.kz/a6209/>.

<sup>3</sup> Kazakhstan and Afghanistan express interest in commercial cooperation, 2012, [https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-and-afghanistan-express-interest-in-commercial-cooperaiton\\_a2497664](https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-and-afghanistan-express-interest-in-commercial-cooperaiton_a2497664).

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<sup>5</sup> Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on cooperation in the Held of civil defense, prevention and emergency response, 2015, [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=35084583](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=35084583).

<sup>6</sup> Kazakhstan and Afghanistan signed several bilateral agreements, 2015, [https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-and-afghanistan-signed-several-bilateral-agreements\\_a2841337](https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-and-afghanistan-signed-several-bilateral-agreements_a2841337).

<sup>7</sup> Kazakhstan and Afghanistan mull cooperation issues, 2019, [https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-and-afghanistan-mull-cooperation-issues\\_a3508893](https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-and-afghanistan-mull-cooperation-issues_a3508893).

Afghanistan's rich mineral resources<sup>8</sup>. In 2014, bilateral trade turnover amounted to \$336.7 million<sup>9</sup>. Over the years it increased significantly to \$622.6 million in 2020<sup>10</sup>.

As the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan in August 2021, Kazakhstan suspended diplomatic relations, although its government officials have visited Kabul several times since then. All Afghan government officials are meanwhile termed “interim” or “acting”. The majority of population sank below the poverty line with growing human insecurity, water scarcity, electricity shortages and neighboring Central Asian countries acting as electricity suppliers (such as Tajikistan) facing outstanding payments. This is because the new government in Kabul runs a drastically diminished state budget now devoid of Western aid, and with nearly \$10 billion assets of the Afghan central bank frozen (which are stored in the Federal Reserve Bank of New York). The banking system is also largely paralyzed. Against this backdrop Kazakhstan obviously experiences serious difficulties selling its pastoral and other products to Afghanistan. As the country most recently accounted for more than half of all exports of Kazakh flour and more than 10% of its grain exports, this poses a problem<sup>11</sup>. Kazakh Trade and Integration Minister Bakhyt Sultanov noted in late 2021 that the bilateral trade volume in the January – October period of this year dropped by nearly 28% compared to the same period of 2020<sup>12</sup>. In spite of payment difficulties, Kazakhstan's Agriculture Minister Yerbol Karashukayev stated in late September 2021 that wheat exports would continue – to be donated or purchased by international donors, usually the United Nations (UN) World Food Program. It seems as if the Kazakh government did so, beyond humanitarian concerns, also in the hopes of being able to sell its products in the future, again, for market prices. Both sides underlined the continuing importance of bilateral trade and cooperation, as in September 2021 when the Kazakh Ambassador to Kabul met with acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi<sup>13</sup>.

More recently in December 2021, a Kazakh delegation visited Kabul to debate trade exchange, common projects and closer political ties. A joint chamber of commerce was envisioned, as was the resumption of direct flights between the two countries<sup>14</sup>. Although thus far none of the Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan, has officially recognized the Taliban as Afghanistan's new government, most have sought pragmatic relations with Kabul to keep the Taliban en-

<sup>8</sup> Kazakhstan and Afghanistan signed several bilateral agreements, [https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-and-afghanistan-signed-several-bilateral-agreements\\_a2841337](https://www.inform.kz/en/kazakhstan-and-afghanistan-signed-several-bilateral-agreements_a2841337).

<sup>9</sup> Stranovoj obzor za 2015. Afghanistan, [Country Review for 2015. Afghanistan], <http://www.kazninvest.kz/images/%D0%90%D0%A4%D0%93%D0%90%D0%9D%D0%98%D0%A1%D0%A2%D0%90%D0%9D.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Kazakh Minister of Trade and Integration visits Afghanistan to discuss bilateral trade opportunities, 2021, <https://astanatimes.com/2021/12/kazakh-minister-of-trade-and-integration-visits-afghanistan-to-discuss-bilateral-trade-opportunities/>.

<sup>11</sup> Kazakhstan to maintain ties, avoid humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/kazakhstan-to-maintain-ties-avoid-humanitarian-catastrophe-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>12</sup> Kazakhstan dispatches 155 tons of aid to Afghanistan, 2021, <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/kazakhstan-dispatches-155-tons-of-aid-to-afghanistan-3586742>.

<sup>13</sup> Kazakhstan has a vested interest in Afghanistan's stability, 2021, <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/sustainability/global-partnerships/4786-kazakhstan-has-a-vested-interest-in-afghanistan-s-stability>.

<sup>14</sup> Kazakh delegation visits Kabul to discuss trade, cooperation with Taliban, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-trade-delegation-visits-kabul/31626074.html>.



gaged and maintain dialogue over challenges of joint concern, such as terrorism, a potential surge of refugees into Central Asia and the deteriorating economic situation. Only Tajikistan keeps voicing downright opposition. Concerns are widespread particularly in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with their significant ethnic populations in Northern Afghanistan that the current government in Kabul is not inclusive enough in terms of ethnic minorities<sup>15</sup>. In Nur-Sultan, by contrast, ethnic Kazakhs residing in Afghanistan are not considered a big issue as their number is apparently very low: according to Kazakh authorities currently around 200<sup>16</sup>. Most have left Afghanistan already during the 1980s, many moving to Turkey [11].

### KAZAKH SUPPORT, STABILITY PROVISION AND CONNECTIVITY AMBITIONS

As noted, Kazakh foreign and security policy towards Afghanistan comprises humanitarian, strategic and material objectives which account for its overall conduct towards the country. This section depicts Kazakhstan's support, stability provision and connectivity ambitions. The following gives attention to its contributions to mediation and conflict resolution.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the U.S. and the deployment of the ISAF in Afghanistan in December 2001, marked the beginning of support of the Central Asian states for stability in Afghanistan in the wider region, notwithstanding the questionable overall effectiveness of the ISAF and the follow-up operation Resolute Support. Kazakhstan was quick to offer overflight rights for ISAF purposes. The subsequent year it also provided its air fields for U.S. army and cargo planes<sup>17</sup>. Altogether, more than 13,000 planes of NATO members used the Kazakh airspace, and in more than 150 cases permission was given for emergency landing on Kazakh airfields. Further, Kazakhstan allowed ISAF railway transit through its territory for non-lethal goods<sup>18</sup>. In terms of humanitarian aid it delivered during 2002-03, 3,000 tons of wheat, 192 tons of foodstuffs, and clothing to the Afghan National Army<sup>19</sup>. These engagements were eased given the Kazakh expert community being largely favorable about cooperation with NATO – unlike the public, which was more hesitant in this regard. Later since 2009 Kazakhstan – as other Central Asian states – would also develop into a strong supporter of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) of which it provided “vital logistical support”, as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Gordon noted [12, p. 90–96]. The NDN facilitated the transportation of equipment for U.S. operations to the theater in Afghanistan. This was meant to

<sup>15</sup> Taliban takeover spurs Central Asian diplomatic activity, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/altaliban-takeover-spurs-central-asian-diplomatic-activity/6290950.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Resettlement of Afghanistan's ethnic Kazakhs to Kazakhstan hampered by Taliban takeover, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/afghanistan-ethnic-kazakhs-taliban/31630084.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Foreign Policy, Regional Stability & Security: Afghanistan, <https://kazakhembus.com/foreign-policy/regional-stability-security/afghanistan>.

<sup>18</sup> Foreign-policy, international organizations: NATO, <https://kazakhembus.com/foreign-policy/international-organizations/nato>.

<sup>19</sup> Brief characteristic of Kazakhstan-Afghanistan diplomatic relations, // <http://e-history.kz/media/upload/2065/2014/06/27/3212f6574003562bc960599c064f94de.pdf>.

circumvent Pakistan, the initial route, where supplies were increasingly exposed to Taliban attacks. In 2012 Kazakhstan (and other Central Asian countries) allowed the NDN to be used for the reverse movement of NATO supplies and troops from Afghanistan to facilitate the drawdown of ISAF troops. For example, the Kazakh port of Aktau was used for NDN shipments [13, p. 7].

In terms of Kazakhstan's involvement into NATO institutionally, over time closer relations materialized. This started in 1992 with joining its North Atlantic Cooperation Council (later transformed into the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council) and the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1995. This included a process of modernizing Kazakhstan's armed forces and improving interoperability with NATO's [12, p. 85–87, 89]. The Alliance's relations with Central Asian countries more generally deepened in areas such as military reform and logistics [14].

Unlike other post-Soviet non-NATO states such as Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine, Kazakhstan did not contribute staffs to the ISAF, however. In 2009, Robert Simmons, Special Representative for the South Caucasus and Central Asia to the NATO Secretary-General, officially invited Kazakhstan to participate in ISAF peace support operations. President Nursultan Nazarbayev responded positively, and on 18 May 2011 the lower house of the Kazakh Parliament voted in favor of a NATO-Kazakhstan agreement. It envisaged four Kazakh officers to be deployed to the ISAF headquarters in Kabul. Yet the issue proved to be controversial in both the political elite and public. There was fierce opposition within large parts of Kazakh society, including the Republic's Society of Afghan War Disabled – on general grounds but also because of Taliban threats against a Kazakh ISAF involvement. There was generally concern that Kazakhstan might compromise its humanitarian, strictly civilian approach and turn into a military actor – despite the rather symbolic and non-military contribution of four officers as envisaged in the agreement. Eventually on 9 June 2011, the upper house of parliament, the Senate, vetoed against the agreement [12].

But Kazakhstan continued to be a staunch supporter of ISAF logistics and provided further substantial aid for Afghanistan. Starting in 2006, it has recurrently devised pertinent Governmental Action Plans on Assistance to Afghanistan. During the Kazakh OSCE Chairpersonship in 2010, President Nazarbayev highlighted the stabilization of the country as one top priority. Over time, Kazakhstan developed into the greatest aid contributor to Afghanistan among the five Central Asian states. During 2006 and 2011 it has financed, inter alia, the building of a school in the Samangan province, a hospital in the Bamyan province, and repairs to the road between Kunduz and Talukan. It also dedicated resources for projects to restore agricultural seed supply, the delivery of grains and other commodities, and for water supply and infrastructure development. Further, it provided training for Afghan law enforcement staff as well as scholarships for 100 Afghani students to allow them to enroll in Kazakh universities<sup>20</sup>. This number of Afghan students with a Kazakh scholarship eventually mounted to 1,000 altogether. Women empowerment has also been an issue in aid for Afghanistan. In 2018 Kazakhstan

organized a Conference on empowerment of Afghan women<sup>21</sup>. The subsequent year it launched an education initiative jointly with the EU Commission and UN Development Programme (UNDP) to graduate 50 Afghan women with advanced degrees from regional universities<sup>22</sup>. Memorandums of Understanding were signed between the Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Kazakh Business Women Council and Association of Business Women<sup>23</sup>. After the Taliban seized power in 2021, 5,000 tons of flour, 500 kilos of medical products and other humanitarian aid were dispatched<sup>24</sup>.

As a vast exporter of agricultural goods, Kazakhstan plays a key role in regional food security, more generally, which would be improved via cross-border initiatives which Kazakhstan therefore supports [13, p. 15–16], [6, p. 14–15]. In its foreign policy, humanitarian and stability objectives closely intermingle with material self-interest. One idea is the envisaged international trade corridor linking the Uzbek border city of Termiz with Afghanistan, through to Pakistani Peshawar – and from there through to ports at the Arabian Sea, such as Karachi. This would simplify the ability to deliver Kazakh (and other Central Asian states) goods to China and Europe. A gas pipeline from Central Asia to India via Pakistan is an-other idea<sup>25</sup>. Further, in March 2012 Kazakh Foreign Minister Yerzhan Kazykhanov suggested a UN logistics hub for delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, to be headquartered in Almaty with its developed transport infrastructure and offices of numerous international donors. The hub would enhance cooperation among the Central Asian states in their aid to Afghanistan, and likewise boost Kazakhstan's effort in aid provision to the country [13, p. 23]. Suffice to say that the hub would likewise create jobs in Almaty and increase Kazakh exports to Afghanistan, more generally. In September 2021 the UN eventually approved the idea. It moreover considered redeploying the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) from Kabul to Almaty<sup>26</sup>. After the Taliban took power, some UNAMA staff were already relocated to Almaty for security reasons. Further, in its quest for positioning itself as a regional leader in aid and development assistance, in 2020 Kazakhstan has established the Kazakhstan Agency of International Development (KazAID). It is supposed to chiefly function as an implementing agent, active for external donors from which fees for KazAid services would be charged, ultimately benefiting a given beneficiary. Thus far, the amount of Kazakh capital in the Agency is envisioned to be rather low [2].

<sup>20</sup> Foreign Policy, Regional Stability & Security: Afghanistan <https://kazakhembus.com/foreign-policy/regional-stability-security/afghanistan>.

<sup>21</sup> Foreign Policy, Regional Stability & Security: Afghanistan, <https://kazakhembus.com/foreign-policy/regional-stability-security/afghanistan>.

<sup>22</sup> EU, UNDP and Kazakhstan launch education programme to train Afghan women, 2019, <https://astanatimes.com/2019/10/eu-undp-and-kazakhstan-launch-education-programme-to-train-afghan-women/>.

<sup>23</sup> Kazakhstan's assistance to Afghanistan helps strengthen regional and global security, diplomat says, 2018, <https://astanatimes.com/2018/09/kazakhstan-s-assistance-to-afghanistan-helps-strengthen-regional-and-global-security-diplomat-says/>.

<sup>24</sup> Kazakh delegation visits Kabul to discuss trade, cooperation with Taliban, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-trade-delegation-visits-kabul/31626074.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Kazakhstan has a vested interest in Afghanistan's stability, 2021, <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/sustainability/global-partnerships/4786-kazakhstan-has-a-vested-interest-in-afghanistan-s-stability>.

<sup>26</sup> Kazakhstan envisions Almaty as regional hub for Afghan aid, 2021, [https://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_cal/features/2021/10/13/feature-01](https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_cal/features/2021/10/13/feature-01).

Yet Kazakhstan's leadership ambitions for Afghanistan have not gone uncontested. There are related initiatives of other Central Asian states, such as Uzbekistan's 6 + 3 Contact Group for Afghanistan<sup>27</sup> under the aegis of the UN [13, p. 24–26]. Both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan likewise wish to host Afghanistan talks to exhibit guidance. For instance, in March 2018 the Uzbek government has hosted a conference on Afghanistan in its capital. Uzbekistan – the most populous and with the most substantial trade with Afghanistan among the five Central Asian states – is generally wary of Kazakhstan's leadership ambitions<sup>28</sup>.

The good news is that there are signs of strengthening bi- and multilateral cooperation which could also lead to more general intra-regional Central Asian cooperation and integration – ideally reaching beyond, also involving Afghanistan. The aforementioned humanitarian hub in Almaty is one example. Against the backdrop of the Taliban seizing power in August 2021, three months later Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have held joint military exercises in Uzbekistan near Termiz which borders Afghanistan, with 300 troops, 50 vehicles, artillery, fighter jets, helicopters and drones, to prepare themselves against potential incursions<sup>29</sup>. In a more positive vein, all five Central Asian states to an extent engage in coordination regarding a transit route between Central Asia and South Asia, traversing Afghanistan [20]. This resonates with Kazakh and other Central Asian state's ambitions in regards to “connectivity”,<sup>30</sup> which has become a buzzword within the OSCE's second (economic and environmental) dimension of security, and elsewhere. Given their landlocked location and general isolation from global markets this comes as no surprise.

### CONFLICT RESOLUTION, MEDIATION AND CONFIDENCE-BUILDING

This section turns to contributions to conflict resolution, mediation and confidence-building in Afghanistan. Here, Kazakhstan as a middle power seeks to show leadership in stabilizing and sustaining regional and multilateral diplomacy. This is in line with other leadership ideas. Since the 1990s, Kazakhstan has amply shown regional and international guidance by way of numerous cooperation initiatives. Among other things, it's First President Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed the Central Asian states to follow the model of European integration and pressed for integration under a Eurasian Union [15, p. 4–9]. Kazakhstan's chairing of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010 was likewise a sign of leadership [16, p. 53]. Also, the country largely paved the way for the declaration of a Central Asian nuclear-weapons-free zone. With some success,

<sup>27</sup> Comprising six neighbors China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—as well as the three additional actors: NATO, Russia and the U.S.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with OSCE official from Central Asia, July 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan Hold Drills Near Afghan Border, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-11-24/uzbekistan-kazakhstan-hold-drills-near-afghan-border>.

<sup>30</sup> Connectivity can roughly be understood as the conscious crafting of economic relations among states or regions.

it has positioned itself proactively with an ambitious diplomatic and foreign policy profile, particularly as an honest peace broker, for example in its role as host to the settlement process on Syria [17, p. 986–990].

The same is true for Afghanistan. Here, as early as in 1996 shortly before the Taliban seized government control and the security situation in Afghanistan aggravated significantly, Kazakhstan called on the UN Security Council to take action, and consulted its Central Asian neighbors and Russia, the results of which became the basis for a UN resolution<sup>31</sup>. The Kazakh government also cooperates with Afghanistan within several regional and international institutions, such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Islamic Organization for Food Security (IOFS)<sup>32</sup>. In 2013 Kazakhstan has moreover initiated the Almaty Process on Refugee Protection and International Migration, meant to promote sustained dialogue and exchange of information on migration issues and on refugee protection challenges in Central Asia and the wider region, including Afghanistan. It covers themes like human trafficking and migrant integration (IOM 2013)<sup>33</sup>. In April 2013, the third Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan was held in Almaty. At this occasion, President Nursultan Nazarbayev stressed the need for an inter-Afghan dialogue on which the international community should focus [18, p. 258–259]. Kazakhstan has also extended its support to the Kabul Process, an Afghanistan initiative commenced in June 2017 involving 27 countries and organizations<sup>34</sup>. During 2017-18, Kazakhstan served as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. During this period, it gained expertise in preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution, confidence-building measures and regional security, largely concentrating on Afghanistan. Among other things it organized an official visit by Security Council members to the country in January 2018 [19]. At the informal OSCE Ministerial gathering in Slovakia in 2019, Kazakhstan mentioned its aim of hosting a meeting on dispute resolution in Afghanistan<sup>35</sup>. Shortly before the Taliban took over, in June 2021 at the occasion of a visit of U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad in Nur-Sultan, both sides discussed the idea of a Kazakh-U.S. enhanced strategic partnership in light of the envisioned withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, without disclosing details on its

<sup>31</sup> Gani diversificiruet afganskuyu politiku cherez Kazahstan, [Ghani diversifies Afghan policy through Kazakhstan], 2015, // <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/91956.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Kazakhstan's assistance to Afghanistan helps strengthen regional and global security, diplomat says, 2018, <https://astanatimes.com/2018/09/kazakhstans-assistance-to-afghanistan-helps-strengthen-regional-and-global-security-diplomat-says/>.

<sup>33</sup> Its members are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Turkey. Iran and Pakistan have an observer status.

<sup>34</sup> Kazakhstan's assistance to Afghanistan helps strengthen regional and global security, diplomat says, 2018, <https://astanatimes.com/2018/09/kazakhstans-assistance-to-afghanistan-helps-strengthen-regional-and-global-security-diplomat-says/>.

<sup>35</sup> Kazakhstan announces initiatives to reinforce OSCE goals, 2019, <https://astanatimes.com/2019/07/kazakhstan-announces-initiatives-to-reinforce-osce-goals/>.

substance. The coordination of bilateral and multilateral efforts for the stabilization and socio-economic reconstruction of the Afghan state was also an issue<sup>36</sup>.

### CONCLUSIONS

Kazakhstan's attitude towards Afghanistan displays a combination of humanitarian, strategic and material objectives which are difficult to disentangle. Lacking a common border it is less exposed to Afghanistan's considerable transnational challenges or "soft security risks" than other Central Asian states further south. At the same time Nur-Sultan capitalizes on its significant wealth, allowing it as a middle power to somewhat shape its environment and contribute to strengthening stability and security in Central Asia and beyond – including Afghanistan. After the termination of the ISAF in 2014, and of all NATO and most other international engagements in the country in mid-2021, this created a huge vacuum which deliberate action and leadership from the immediate vicinity can help fill. This is all the more relevant as the Central Asian republics are Muslim (albeit strictly secular), and hence apparently more acceptable for the Taliban than Western liberal-democratic donors. Engaging the Taliban below official diplomatic recognition amounts to a balancing act, however. But isolating the Taliban from the international community might risk further aggravating the already difficult situation and encourage even nastier forces. In fact, the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) full-fledged terrorist organization poses a serious threat to the Taliban government. It must be sensed out how pragmatic and constructive policies with the new government can be pursued.

To engage the Taliban, stimulate inter-Afghan reconciliation, facilitate sustainable development, and devise and implement infrastructure projects linking Afghanistan with its northern neighbors (as distant as these may seem now with the Taliban in power), will only succeed if the Central Asian states and other actors work together, particular in pertinent international institutions such as the UN, CAREC and the Asian Development Bank. The aforementioned initiatives of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the two largest Central Asian donors in Afghanistan, are positive signs in this direction, notwithstanding concurrent bilateral competition and partially diverging visions. The current Uzbek presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev creates a significant window of opportunity for strengthening and streamlining joint stabilizing efforts towards Afghanistan and build mutually beneficial and good-neighborly relations. The remaining Central Asian states should be included, as much as possible. Ultimately, concerted effort in this regard and building stronger ties with Afghanistan is likely to also serve as a catalyst for intra-Central Asian cooperation.

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<sup>36</sup> Kassym-Jomart Tokayev receives U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, 2021, <https://www.akorda.kz/en/kassym-jomart-tokayev-receives-us-special-representative-for-afghanistan-reconciliation-zalmay-khalilzad-1453915>.

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# INTENSIFICATION OF MIGRATION PROCESSES IN AFGHANISTAN UNDER THE NEW TALIBAN REGIME

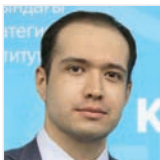


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## **ABSTRACT**

The coming to power of Taliban movement, which has not yet been recognized by the international community, with rare exceptions, in Afghanistan in August 2021, significantly aggravated already difficult situation in food security, and as a consequence, situation with internal and external migration of the population.

In the article, the author analyzed the current migration situation in the country, cited the experience of foreign countries in receiving Afghan refugees, and also made a forecast regarding further development of the situation.

## **KEYWORDS**

Afghanistan, food crisis, migration, population.



## INTRODUCTION

After disastrous events in Ukraine, the Afghan issue quickly moved from the top lines of world news to the secondary ones.

Meanwhile, the situation in Afghanistan is getting more and more difficult every month and day.

The most important factor in the current humanitarian situation in the country is shortage of food. This problem is not something new for Afghanistan and has its deep roots since the beginning of the civil war in Afghanistan in 1979. After many years, the country is still staying one of the world leaders in terms of severe malnutrition and developmental delays in children under the age of five [1]. UNICEF declares that about 10 million children in Afghanistan need humanitarian assistance to survive; it is predicted that one million children will suffer from nutritional deficiencies in the coming years.

However, food security situation has significantly worsened since the Taliban came to power in August 2021. Before that, under regimes of the presidents H. Karzai (2004-2014) and Ashraf Ghani (2014-2021), the food situation was to some extent solved by international food aid programs, but after coming of Taliban, provision of external assistance became significantly more complicated, taking into account large-scale violation of human rights in Afghanistan and international unrecognized status of the Taliban movement. Thus, the international community urgently froze billions of Afghanistan's assets due to the fear of their falling into the hands of the Taliban movement – officially recognized by many countries of the world as a terrorist movement.

The complication in provision of humanitarian assistance by international community does not mean that it has stopped. Thus, in January 2022, the UN appealed to the world community about the need for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan in the amount of 4.4 billion Euro to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. The United States has already expressed its intention to provide 300 million USD under this initiative [2]. Last year, Kazakhstan had sent 5,000 tons of wheat flour as humanitarian aid. The list of countries that have provided and are ready to provide humanitarian aid can be continued further.

However, the problem lies not only in obviously insufficient scale of assistance from international community, but also in distribution of this aid inside Afghanistan. If distribution of humanitarian aid before the Taliban regime was subjected to considerable criticism, accusations of corruption and lack of transparency in the process, then withdrawal of almost all international forces from the territory of Afghanistan in 2021 neutralized all control systems for distribution of humanitarian aid.

As a result, paradox situation has developed when the international community has clear understanding of the need to provide food and medical assistance and possibility to avoid, at least temporarily, humanitarian catastrophe and new waves of migration to different countries, including Western countries, and on the other hand – fear that the Taliban will use humanitarian aid for their own purposes and non-transparency of its distribution.

FROM HUMANITARIAN POINT OF VIEW, IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT VULNERABLE SEGMENTS OF THE AFGHAN POPULATION – WOMEN AND CHILDREN – WERE IN THE MOST DIFFICULT SITUATION.

As a result, according to international estimates, Afghanistan leads the world in terms of the the number of people experiencing severe food shortages: more than 23 million people need food, approximately 95% of the population are malnourished [3].

Food problems, coupled with security problems, lack of access to the former benefits of civilization (education, medicine, entertainment, etc.) lead to the fact that a huge number of Afghans want to leave the country. We do not know, how many of 39 million inhabitants of Afghanistan are ready to migrate from the country, in which directions and for what time, given the impossibility of conducting any research at the moment. However, it is obvious that taking into account plight and high level of danger, it can be assumed that the number of potential migrants is in the millions. Thus, according to the UN Human

Development Index, Afghanistan is currently the least developed country in Asia and ranks 169th out of 189 countries [4].

From humanitarian point of view, it should be noted that vulnerable segments of the Afghan population – women and children – were in the most difficult situation. Thus, the Human Rights Watch report notes that in less than seven months, the Taliban closed secondary schools for girls, created barriers to higher education and banned most women from working [5]. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was also abolished and a ban on leaving the country alone was introduced, which complicated the process of female immigration.

Before the Taliban came to power, insecurity was the main reason for women leaving Afghanistan (42% of women, which is significantly higher than men). Other reasons included lawlessness, economic, personal and family reasons, lack of social services, including flight from forced marriage or domestic violence.

Analyzing the food problem in Afghanistan, it is impossible not to note the demographic factor. So, despite prolonged – almost half a century of war – “civil” or with external participation, the population of Afghanistan after 1980 more than doubled by 2022 – from 15 million to 39 million people. Limited wars do not interfere with demographic growth in Afghanistan at all. It is expected that from 2022 to 2050, the increase will be another 77% [6].

Demographic growth in the country creates enormous problems for all sectors of the destroyed economy. For example, Afghanistan needs to create about 400 thousand jobs annually in the labor market to accommodate new workers, which is practically impossible. According to statistics, most conservative estimates, almost every fourth person in the labor market in Afghanistan, or about 2 million people, either works less than eight hours a week, or does not have a job and is actively looking for it. At the same time, only a few Afghans have access to productive or paid work. Also, almost three quarters of the population under 30 years of age, which is approximately 8 million people, enter the labor market with low education and limited employment opportunities. Unemployment is the most serious phenomenon among young people (28%) and women (37%). In the whole

country, almost half of the unemployed are people under the age of 25 (45.6%). Among urban unemployed youth, 54% have a secondary education or higher, in rural areas, on the contrary, 54% of unemployed male youth have no formal education, and 37% are illiterate.

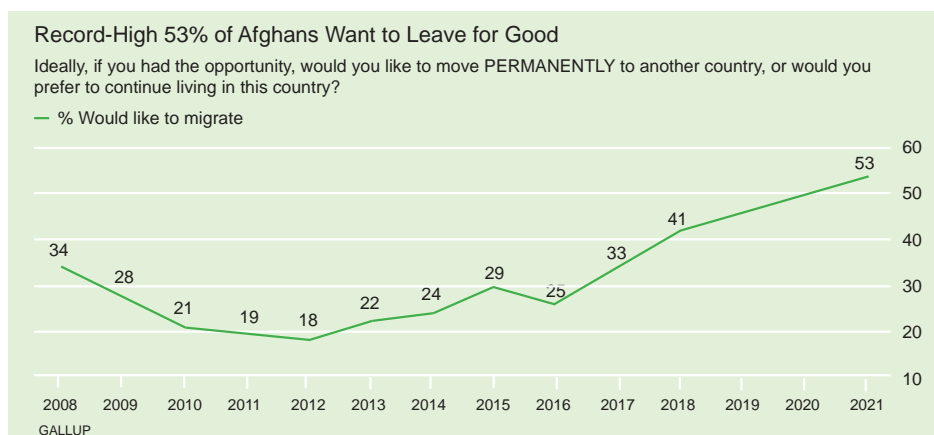
In general, there is a clear picture of an extremely difficult situation and the need for large-scale, multifaceted humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan on a systematic basis. In the meantime, migration from the country is seen as the only way out for many millions of Afghans.

### MIGRATION POTENTIAL

Today, Afghans are one of the largest refugee groups in the world: 2.6 million people live outside their country of origin [7]. The largest share of asylum applications in the EU is submitted by Afghan citizens. In addition, Pakistan and Iran, Afghanistan's two closest neighbors, have already taken in millions of Afghan refugees. With further aggravation of humanitarian and political crisis, it is likely that even more Afghans will leave their homes.

One of the possible destinations as a transit territory may be the countries of Central Asia, and for some, a permanent place of residence. Such an outcome can lead to big problems for region's countries, taking into account not only logistical issues, readiness to accept thousands of migrants, promptly deploy tent camps, but also security issues related to potential infiltration of radicalists.

The percentage of Afghans who declared their desire to leave their homeland forever rose to a record high of 53% in August and September last year. This percentage is one of the highest in the world in 2021. Moreover, this figure will potentially increase as social conditions deteriorate after the Taliban came to power.



### WHO WANTS TO LEAVE AFGHANISTAN?

The surge in desire of Afghans to leave their country is evident in almost all demographic groups, but it is especially pronounced among Afghan men and those who have at least secondary education. In the period from 2018 to 2021, the percentage of men who said they would like to leave increased by 21 points from

35% to 56%. Over the same period, the percentage of Afghans with above-average education who wanted to leave increased by 22 points – from 40% to 62% [8].

**Desire to Migrate Increased Among Almost All Demographics in Afghanistan**  
 % of Afghans who would like to move permanently from their country

	2018	2021	Change
	%	%	pct.pt.
Men	35	56	+21
Women	47	50	+3
Aged 15 to 29	44	58	+14
Aged 30 to 49	42	48	+6
Aged 50 +	29	46	+17
Up to eight years of school	42	50	+8
Nine to 15 years of school	40	62	+22
Urban	41	44	+3
Rural	41	56	+15

GALLUP

Desire to immigrate among women increased slightly, but a high percentage was observed already in 2018. The 50% of women who said they wanted to leave in 2021 is not much higher than the 47%, who declared this in 2018, which was also a record high at that time.

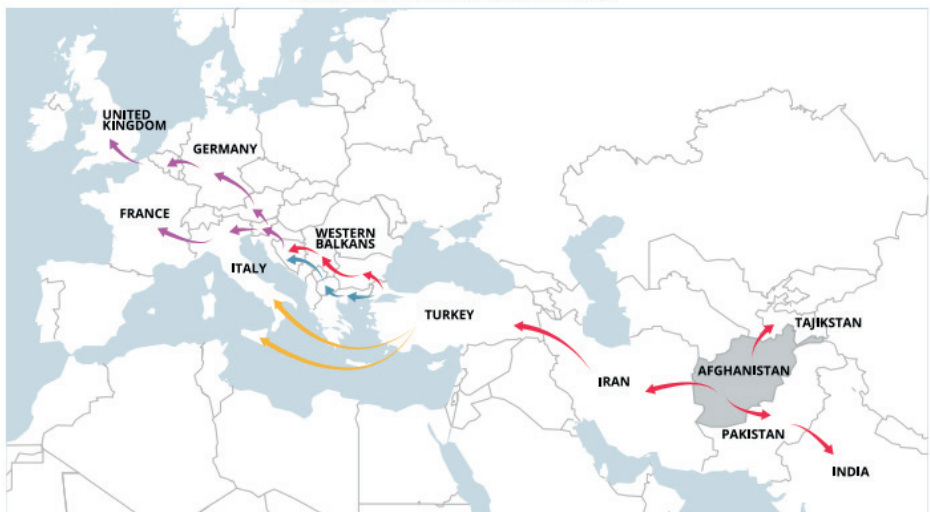
### WHERE DO AFGHANS WANT TO GO?

Afghans’ preferences about where they would like to go if they could leave have somewhat changed since 2018. Nevertheless, countries such as Turkey, Germany, Canada and the USA still top the list of the most desirable destinations.

According to surveys, Turkey is the most popular destination for potential migrants from Afghanistan – 25% said they would like to move there. 15% mentioned Germany and 12% mentioned Canada, compared to 7% in 2018.

### POLICY OF RECEIVING AFGHAN REFUGEES BY FOREIGN COUNTRIES

Refugee flows from Afghanistan



Graphic indicates general refugee flows rather than precise geographical locations.

**Central Asian countries.** Afghanistan borders Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. All these States have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. Nevertheless, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), consisting of post-Soviet states, has developed a unified position on non-acceptance of Afghan refugees and conducted combat exercises on its borders to counter the movement of Afghan refugees.

President of Kazakhstan Qassym-Jomart Tokayev declared his support for the CSTO ban, and President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Zhaparov proposed creating a security belt in the region to prevent possible encroachments from outside [9]. Russian President Vladimir Putin, in turn, spoke out against even temporary accommodation of Afghan citizens in Central Asia, who could apply for visas to the United States and Europe. This is partly why even Tajikistan, which offered to temporarily shelter up to 100,000 Afghan refugees, later eventually accepted fewer Afghans.

As a result, most Afghans seeking resettlement are likely to target neighboring Iran and Pakistan, which have already jointly accepted more than 2.2 million refugees by 2021. Currently, there are about 1.5 million refugees in Pakistan alone.

**Pakistan** has hosted Afghan refugees since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, despite the fact that it has not signed either the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol. However, the open policy of the 1980s (which allowed more than three million Afghans to find refuge in Pakistan) has been replaced by strict restrictions.

In 2018, the Pakistani government put pressure on Afghans to return to Afghanistan. A month before the fall of Kabul, Pakistan's Interior Minister announced that Afghans would be imprisoned in camps, and all Afghans who re-cross the border would be banned from entering the cities. Shortly before the final overthrow of the Afghan government in August 2021 Pakistan has closed the border with Afghanistan. It has since reopened some border checkpoints, but border crossings remain strictly restricted. Those Afghans who managed to illegally cross the border of Pakistan face detention and deportation. Partly for this reason, Afghans rarely manage to register as refugees with the UNHCR.

For air travel to Pakistan, Afghans currently need a passport and a valid Pakistani visa. However, visas are only valid for two months. The flight, which was recently suspended, can only carry three hundred Afghans a day, and the ticket costs 1,500 USD. Road trip requires overcoming hundreds of miles from the capital through dangerous areas of Afghanistan.

**Iran** has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. Previously, Afghans freely crossed the border to work in Iran. The 600-mile-long border with Iran, consisting mainly of desert, is currently patrolled by the Taliban to a lesser extent than other border areas. Iran has also set up several refugee camps.

It is noteworthy that Iran continues to pursue a policy of forcibly repatriating Afghans without documents, despite the risk of repression by the Taliban or starvation in Afghanistan. New Humanitarian estimates that the total number of Afghans repatriated to Afghanistan from Iran alone was 860,000 in 2020, most of them had no documents. The International Organization for Migration estimates that Iran deports 20,000 to 30,000 Afghans every week. Iran also insists

that registered Afghan refugees can be repatriated as soon as Iran feels that the situation has improved, without specifying what criteria will be used to assess the situation [10].

**India**, like Pakistan, has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Refugee Protocol. As of 2019, India has accepted more than 10,000 Afghan refugees, although there have been concerns that it discriminates against Muslims by offering asylum in their country.

**Turkey** has long been a destination or transit point for Afghan refugees heading west. At the same time, Ankara, which has already accepted at least four million Syrian refugees, does not express a desire to accept more. Turkish President Erdogan has explicitly stated that Turkey will not become a “refugee warehouse” of Europe. Therefore, in response to the increase in the flow of Afghan refugees, Turkey has strengthened security of its border with Iran, including construction of new walls and fences made of barbed wire, as well as increased border patrols.

**Western democracies.** In EU countries, refugee policy is largely developed separately, since member States treat refugees and migrants differently: for example, the Governments of Sweden and Germany have usually been more open to refugees, while the Government of Hungary has traditionally opposed. However, the EU currently has a temporary moratorium on deportation of Afghan asylum seekers, which was introduced shortly before the fall of Kabul. In the last two weeks of August, when the Taliban took power, Germany evacuated 5,347 people (including 4,100 Afghans); Italy – 5,011 people (including 4,890 Afghan citizens); France, more than 3,000 (including 2,600 Afghans); the Netherlands, 2,500 and Spain 1 898 Afghans. Sweden, Belgium, Poland and Denmark evacuated from 900 to 1,400 people each. Based on these calculations and the smaller number of people evacuated by other EU member states, it turns out that about 22,000 Afghans were evacuated to the European Union.

Since then, EU policy has focused on “supporting refugee camps in Afghanistan’s neighboring states,” although very few Afghans were able to cross the border with neighboring countries after the Taliban seized power, let alone obtain safe haven in these countries. Poor conditions in the camps and threat of repatriation among neighbors keep encouraging Afghans to make their way to Europe, despite dangerous conditions and threats of violence they face when crossing the border. In December 2021, fifteen EU member states agreed to accept 40,000 Afghans for resettlement, where Germany accepted 25,000 people, the Netherlands – 3,159, and Spain and France committed to accept 2,500 people each.

**The United States.** Since August 2021, the US has resettled more Afghan refugees than any other state. However, it is important to distinguish Afghan evacuees, who are registered in accordance with special visa regimes, from previously operating refugee resettlement programs in the United States.

At the time of the fall of Kabul, Afghans wishing to enter the United States had two official visa routes. Special immigration visas (SIV) could be obtained by Afghans (for themselves and their families) who worked with the American armed forces. This concerned about 50,000 people. Others are assessed according to three priority levels for refugee resettlement: the first priority level (P1) is for individual cases in which resettlement was urgently needed, P2 for groups of

special humanitarian concern, and P3 for family members of already resettled refugees.

In early August, the P2 right was offered to Afghans who worked directly for the US government or as direct contractors for programs funded by the US government. This expanded the rights of about 200,000 Afghans. However, P2 candidates were informed that they could apply only after leaving Afghanistan, which required the possibility to enter a third country, and it was assumed that this process would take from one to two years without any guarantees of admission.

Most of this system was put into practice as a result of the evacuation from Kabul airport during the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. During August, the United States evacuated about 82,015 Afghans. This group included US citizens and Afghans eligible to qualify for SIV. Also included were many who managed to make their way to the airport and were evacuated without any clear procedure to determine their legal status. According to estimates, 250,000 Afghans eligible for a U.S. visa remain trapped inside Afghanistan.

By early September, at least 24,000 evacuees had already arrived in the United States, another 23,000 were at US military bases abroad, and the remaining 20,000 were waiting in other countries. By mid-September, the number of Afghan refugees in the United States had increased to 37 thousand people. Out of total of 82,015 evacuees, only 36,821 people were SIV applicants. Apparently, the U.S. Government continues to help most of these individuals enter the United States as part of release on parole procedure from the humanitarian viewpoint, which is faster than the usual refugee resettlement process.

All US states, with the exception of Hawaii, South Dakota, West Virginia and Wyoming, have committed to resettling these refugees, the states of California and Texas have received the largest number of refugees (California and Texas have always been the leading states for receiving Afghan refugees, followed by Virginia, Washington and Maryland. Although there is political support for accepting refugees in Hawaii, the state's infrastructure is not able to resettle them).

**Great Britain.** Like the SIV program in the United States, the British Afghan Refugees Assistance Policy (ARAP) provided resettlement assistance to Afghans who worked with British military forces and government officials and were at risk of repressions from the Taliban. As part of Pitting operation, the British military forces evacuated 15,000 people in the second half of August (via Dubai to Brize Norton Royal Air Force Base in the UK) [11]. As part of this evacuation, a thousand people were called, described as particularly at risk, including female politicians, members of the LGBT community, activists and judges.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the additional Afghan Citizen Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) on August 18, 2021. Under the scheme, the UK pledged to take in 5,000 people within a year of the fall of Kabul and 20,000 people within indefinite period of time. The scheme was designed to give priority to those who worked with the UK in Afghanistan and promoted democracy, women's rights, freedom of speech and the rule of law.

**Canada** initially pledged to accept 20,000 Afghan refugees, increasing their number to 40,000 after the country's parliamentary elections in September 2021. This figure is comparable to the Syrian resettlement program, which marked

Trudeau's first year in office, under which 39,636 refugees were accepted from November 2015 to the end of 2016.

During the 2021 parliamentary campaign, Trudeau's Liberal Party also pledged 350 million Canadian dollars for refugee resettlement. The Canadian Resettlement Program is sponsored by both the state and private individuals.

After August 2021, **Australia** evacuated more than 3,200 Australian citizens and Afghans with Australian visas. The country is committed to accepting up to 3,000 more Afghan refugees. The Immigration Minister said those who came to Australia on temporary visas would be allowed to stay in the country "as long as the security situation remains dire." Later, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison pledged not to restrict the admission of Afghan refugees, canceling the initial figure of 3,000 and the existing limit of 13,750 refugees for resettlement.

At the same time, the Australian Ministry of the Interior warns against any attempts to arrive in the country by sea, confirming the policy against accepting asylum seekers arriving by sea. Many Afghan refugees who fled to Southeast Asia were unable to reach Australia because of these restrictions.

## CONCLUSION

The twenty-year war in Afghanistan has created many socio-economic problems for this country, one of which is the great dependence of the country's budget on funds from Western donors.

The economic isolation of Afghanistan, restriction of country's access to its international reserves, resources of Western financial institutions and blocking normal operation of its banking system in international payments system only exacerbates the existing humanitarian crisis.

At the same time, the situation is aggravated by the current demographic instability. Due to the Taliban's coming to power, tendency to emigration among the population has only intensified. The lack of necessary human resources, competent specialists in the field of public administration and technological development will only generate new problems and slow down modernization of the country.

The issue of humanitarian aid should not remain in the shadows, politicized and used as an instrument of pressure on Afghanistan.

The economic difficulties, that Afghanistan faces, are "opportunity window" for the Taliban, which they will be able to overcome with help of international community, provided they are committed to the goals of socio-economic prosperity of the country.

The topic of supporting the Afghan people will obviously be relevant in the next decade – the world community needs to be realistic and understand that stabilizing humanitarian situation and resuming economic growth will take time.

In this regard, it would be short-sighted to rely solely on the UN's help. In the current conditions, the Central Asian countries have every opportunity to pick up the baton and try to make their contribution to save the lives and health of the residents of long-suffering Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan, as a state with a proactive foreign policy and a solid background of assistance in both the food sector and training of Afghan citizens, is likely



to continue participating in the fate of this country. It is very important that Kazakhstan's efforts be coupled with the efforts of the entire Central Asian region, since the issues of potential migration of the population of Afghanistan are issues of regional security.

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# AFGHANISTAN AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN REGION

## PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS



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### **ABSTRACT**

The international community is united in condemning transnational terrorism, Taliban's disregard for the rights of Afghanistan's national minorities and the threat of drug trafficking. Nevertheless, it is impossible to neglect the reasons that contributed to this movement in its radical forms and the expansion of the conflict, which eventually took on an international scale. In particular, we are talking about armed intervention by foreign countries that have repeatedly tried to occupy this country and dictate an ideology and way of life alien to the Afghan people. After years of unsuccessful military operations, foreign troops were forced to leave the territory of Afghanistan, leaving the country in a state of humanitarian and economic crisis. The new Government appeals to the entire world community, in particular to the UN and to individual countries with requests for recognition and for provision of humanitarian and economic assistance to the population. The problem is complex and requires careful discussion.

### **KEYWORDS**

Afghanistan, Taliban movement, Central Asia, Russia, China, Islamism and Jihadism, American troops, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, terrorist groups.

## INTRODUCTION

It is quite difficult to understand the causes of instability and the current critical situation in Afghanistan and around it without a brief description of previous events. Afghanistan, known in historical literature as the “Durrani Empire,” appeared in 1747. Information about it rarely made it to the pages of the world press, although it periodically became the object of encroachments by foreign powers. At the geopolitical level, Afghanistan began to attract special attention only in the second half of the twentieth century – after the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan at the end of December 1979. Since then, information about the situation in this country and the region has not left the front pages of publications in the media around the world.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The presented paper uses historical and systematic research method, which is characterized by the study of objects and events of the past as integral historical systems. This paper analyzes changes in the structure and functions of internal and external relations occurring during the historical process.

The main issue under discussion is Taliban’s takeover<sup>1</sup> who renamed the state formation as “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan“ (IEA). This was preceded by the following events:

- June 1973 – anti-monarchist revolution; Mohammad Daoud (cousin of deposed King Zahir Shah) was declared President of the Republic;
- April 1978 – military coup (“Saur Revolution“), the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) came to power; the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) was announced;
- December 1979 – at the request of the DRA government, Soviet troops were brought into the country;
- February 1989 – withdrawal of Soviet troops;
- 1989–1996 – civil war, struggle for power between the militant groups of Mujahideen;
- 1996–2001 – Taliban’s takeover, the establishment of the IEA was announced;
- 2001–2021 – the country is occupied by US and NATO troops who are fighting against the Taliban under the slogan of combating terrorism; the new name of the country – “Islamic Republic of Afghanistan“ (IRA) was announced;
- August 15, 2021, Taliban detachments enter Kabul almost unhindered; on August 31, US military personnel leave Afghanistan;
- The leaders of Taliban movement announce the new name of the country – “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.“

In 1996, the Taliban intervened in the situation (Talib translated from Arabic – a student of a religious school – Madras). Their detachments were formed on the territory of Pakistan from Afghan refugees who received military training under

<sup>1</sup> The organization's activities are prohibited by the law of the Russian Federation.

the guidance of Pakistani instructors from Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The Taliban quickly seized almost the entire territory of Afghanistan, establishing at first a strict regime of radical Islam.

On September 11, 2001, the terrorists of the Al-Qaeda group<sup>2</sup>, led by Osama bin Laden, carried out an air attack on New York, blowing up the buildings of the World Trade Center. The US government declared war on terrorism and, referring to the fact that Osama bin Laden was in Afghanistan, in October of the same year, it transferred combat troops of the American army to this country. They managed to oust the Taliban to Pakistan. A 20-year war has begun between the US army, its NATO allies and the Taliban movement.

Realizing the futility of the war, Washington began negotiations with the Taliban and signed an agreement in Doha (Qatar) on February 29, 2020, obliging the parties not to attack the enemy. However, this did not concern the fighting of the Taliban forces of the IRA government, which was not allowed to negotiate.

Western researchers write that when in April 2021, US President Joe Biden announced the “rapid and unconditional” withdrawal of American troops, “he did not even have a plan to fulfill various key tasks” – to implement the withdrawal. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) counted in vain on the support of the United States in opposing the Taliban detachments. “The Americans “apparently coordinated their actions more with their enemies [the Taliban] than with their allies<sup>3</sup>”. “The morale of ANSF soldiers was undermined, and the Taliban were convinced that they were going to victory<sup>4</sup>”.

Assessing the results of the invasions of powers, who repeatedly tried to conquer Afghanistan, I recall the words from the poem by the Russian writer L.N. Tolstoy, which he wrote during the Crimean War (August 1855): It was smooth on paper, but they forgot about the ravines, and walk on them<sup>5</sup>. “The phrase is used often in relation to politicians and the military, who develop plans, ignoring the realities (age-old traditions and customs) of the life of the peoples who resisted the invaders. The same situation was in Afghanistan.

Thus, on August 15, 2021, Taliban detachments entered Kabul for the second time without encountering resistance. Former IRA President Ashraf Ghani has fled. The Taliban gained control of the country’s territory almost without a fight and announced their intention to henceforth call the country the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” (IEA). Only the province Panjshir, where the Resistance Front under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud Jr. tried to continue the resistance, did not submit to the Taliban. Then the leadership of the Republic of Tajikistan announced support for the efforts of the Front (it mainly includes Afghan Tajiks).

<sup>2</sup> The organization's activities are prohibited by the law of the Russian Federation.

<sup>3</sup> Clark, Kate. *Afghanistan's conflict in 2021 (2): Republic collapse and Taliban victory in the long view of history // Afghanistan Analysts Networks (AAN)*, 30 Dec 2021. URL: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/afghanistans-conflict-in-2021-2-republic-collapse-and-taliban-victory-in-the-long-view-of-history/> (accessed 3.01.2022).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *In everyday life, it sounds like this: “It was smooth on paper, but they forgot about the ravines.”*

They write a lot about the current situation in and around Afghanistan, often without, unfortunately, going into the study of the underlying causes of the confrontation of various forces both in Afghanistan itself and in the region. Afghanistan is a multinational state created by the Pashtuns, representatives of the country's indigenous population.

Interethnic relations have been and are extremely important in the life of Afghan society. This is mentioned by most experts [1]. The country's leadership, both under the monarchy and under the republican system, pursued "a policy of ensuring the dominant role of the Pashtuns in all areas of the economic and political life of the country... The Pashtuns had numerous officially and informally secured privileges: the government apparatus and the Officer corps consisted of Pashtuns and partly from the Tajiks, the Pashtun tribes were exempt from taxes, from conscription into the army, they were allocated the best lands, including in the areas of settlement of national minorities..." [2, pp. 109–110].

Today, having expelled foreign conquerors, *they returned to their homeland, and did not seize someone else's territory*. It should also be remembered that Pashtuns make up almost half of the population of Afghanistan and at the same time most of them live in Pakistan. (This is the result of the policy of Great Britain, which once divided a single people.) In Afghanistan itself, Pashtuns consider themselves a titular nation, they mostly treat national minorities arrogantly, rarely admitting them to key positions, but using their knowledge and work. Such a situation in society has always had a negative impact on interethnic relations in the country.

The Taliban movement represents exclusively Pashtuns, both Afghan and Pakistani. Of course, during the conflict, the Taliban were joined by a variety of groups representing other ethnic groups, but they were temporary "fellow travelers" who pursued their own political goals. Sometimes they were joined by criminal groups engaged in racketeering, drug smuggling and primitive robbery.

According to the head of the department of the Anti-Terrorist Center of the CIS member states, the number of groups that joined Taliban movement "reaches 4–5 thousand people, including citizens of foreign states, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China (Uighurs), Russia (Chechens), Tajikistan, Uzbekistan. These foreign fighters have disappeared among the militants Taliban, having sworn allegiance to them, and now together with them form a single whole<sup>6</sup>".

OF COURSE, DURING THE CONFLICT, THE TALIBAN WERE JOINED BY A VARIETY OF GROUPS REPRESENTING OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS, BUT THEY WERE TEMPORARY "FELLOW TRAVELERS" WHO PURSUED THEIR OWN POLITICAL GOALS.

<sup>6</sup> Zarudny B. *The situation in Afghanistan and the risks of terrorist activity in the region // International Life*, 2021, No. 12: URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/2602> (accessed 31.01.2022). The expression "a single whole" in this case seems to us to be erroneous.

Armed intervention in the internal affairs of Afghanistan has brought the situation in the country to a critical point in all aspects. Now local and foreign media state, “The Afghan state is teetering on the verge of complete collapse<sup>7</sup>“. According to Western analysts, “the economic shocks are the result of donors donating in creation of Afghan state starting in 2001 [the year of the invasion of the United States and its allies], who created the state largely dependent on their aid, and after Taliban’s takeover on August 15 sharply reduced this aid... With the withdrawal of [American] troops... donors immediately refused direct cooperation with the new regime... They also froze the state assets of Afghanistan and the pre-existing sanctions against Taliban became de facto sanctions against the IEA government<sup>8</sup>“.

**Western analysts, pointing to the shortcomings of the former IRA government, drew attention to the “systemic weaknesses of the Afghan political system and the security establishment.”**

We can agree with such conclusions if we are talking only about an “economic shock.“ Let us recall the following historical facts: the intervention of the British expeditionary corps in the XIX century (twice) and in the first half of the XX century; the special operation of the Red Army in 1929 to support King Amanullah Khan; the entry and stay of Soviet troops in this country (1979–1989); the actual occupation of Afghanistan by US and NATO forces (2001–2021). Thus, it appears that the events resulting in unstable situation in the country began at earlier date and the obvious interference from the outside should not be neglected.

Western analysts, pointing to the shortcomings of the former IRA government, drew attention to the “systemic weaknesses of the Afghan political system and the security establishment.“ Finding a job in the government, the Interior Ministry and the police “often looked like a ‘dual-purpose’ organization focused on security and involved in crime“ The police were described as “corrupt pyramid networks that engage in racketeering and extortion instead of protecting citizens and ensuring the rule of law.“ Bribes were taken “for appointments, conclusion of unreliable contracts,“ etc. This was typical primarily in the police and the Interior Ministry, to a lesser extent in the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Ministry of

<sup>7</sup> *Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe // Crisis group, REPORT 317 / ASIA, 6 DECEMBER 2021: URL: <https://www.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/317-beyond-emergency-relief-averting-afghanistans-humanitarian-catastrophe> (accessed 12/21/2021).*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Defense. Military personnel of ANSF units “often cited a shortage of ammunition or food as the reason for their inability to defend posts and facilities in 2021”<sup>9</sup>.

Attributing various kinds of crimes and terrorist attacks to the Taliban is beneficial for political effect, but it is wrong. It is important to take into account that Taliban is not a single, consolidated military-political organization. During the above-mentioned conflicts, Afghans called for the help of their fellow tribesmen from Pakistan, as well as non-Afghan co-religionists from other countries. Detachments of immigrants from the countries of the Near and Middle East and Central Asia also took part in the 20-year struggle against the American and NATO interventionists. Some of them fought in Syria and Iraq on the side of the “Islamic State of Syria and the Levant” (ISIS, IS, Al-Qaeda), and then moved to Afghanistan. The Taliban accepted their help, but now, after the interventionists left, having become masters of the situation, they intend to part with their foreign colleagues, paying, accordingly, for their services. The settlement process is delayed due to lack of funds, since, as mentioned above, the assets of the former Afghan government are frozen. Some of the foreign “volunteers” remain on the territory of Afghanistan. The Taliban will be able to get rid of them only after they pay for help. Having come to power, the Pashtun Taliban have no particular desire to continue contacts with “invited associates.”

Firstly, Taliban does not share the main goal of Al-Qaeda – to make the whole world Islamic. Secondly, there are differences between the Taliban and jihadist groups in the interpretation of the tenets of Islam. Thirdly, Taliban does not want to share power with the aliens in sovereign Afghanistan. In general, at the moment it is difficult to judge the balance of forces in the leadership of the IEA, since the struggle for taking key positions continues.

Let us recall that from the point of view of interstate relations, the Taliban-Pashtuns have never set out to seize the territories of neighboring countries and have not carried out hostile actions against them. Their task is to preserve the integrity of the State of Afghanistan, where they are the absolute masters. Taliban rail against interference in their internal affairs at the state level, and they themselves do not interfere in the affairs of other countries. However, Taliban is still required to eliminate the following main aspects: 1) suppression of the rights of ethnic minorities; 2) failure to fulfill the promise to form an inclusive government; 3) continued contacts with terrorist groups. For these reasons, the international community refuses to recognize the IEA regime as the legitimate government of the country, although it continues to call for humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people.

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<sup>9</sup> Clark, Kate. *Afghanistan's conflict in 2021 (2): Republic collapse and Taliban victory in the long view of history* // AAN, 30 Dec 2021. URL: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/afghanistans-conflict-in-2021-2-republic-collapse-and-taliban-victory-in-the-long-view-of-history/> (accessed 03.01.2022).

PAKISTAN PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN RESTORING THE COMBAT POTENTIAL OF THE TALIBAN AFTER 2001, PROVIDING THE LEADERSHIP OF TALIBAN AND ITS MILITANTS WITH A SAFE HAVEN WHERE THEY COULD ORGANIZE, TRAIN RECRUITS AND RECUPERATE.

Statement of some Taliban Leaders expressed after they came to power sometime demonstrates desire to present their slightly updated regime (compared with 1996–2001). Even the recognition of previous mistakes slips through the statement (although it is not specified what they were). According to incoming information, the most radical positions are taken by representatives of the pro-Pakistan group “Haqqani Network” (HN)<sup>10</sup>, which has close ties with Al-Qaeda. In the process of forming the Taliban government, the leader of the “Network” Sirajuddin Haqqani achieved the post of Deputy Head of Taliban. According to experts, a distinctive feature of the ideology of the Haqqani Network is “the prevalence of general religious values over the ‘Pashtunwali’ which is an unwritten code of laws and the code of honor of the Pashtun tribes, which in some matters strongly differ from Sharia law<sup>11</sup>”.

The group consists of highly qualified specialists with technical skills in the manufacture of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and rockets. HN have a reputation as the most irreconcilable and dangerous terrorist group. At the time, the FBI offered \$10 million for information about the location of S. Haqqani. The constant shakeups in Taliban government is most likely connected precisely with the position of S. Haqqani, who seeks to promote his people to key posts<sup>12</sup>.

Another opponent of Taliban is “Islamic State – Khorasan Province” (ISKP), operating in some areas of Afghanistan. It is a branch of the Islamic State and is known as an extremely radical group (jihadists), practicing terrorist acts in Kabul and other major cities of Afghanistan. On December 22, 2021, the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee added the leader of the ISKP, Sanaullah Ghafari (also known as Shahab al-Muhajir) to the sanctions list<sup>13</sup>. This group, along with the IMU, Haqqani Network and some others, is usually classified as jihadists, unlike Islamist extremist organizations. As the author of the book “Islam after Communism” A. Khalid writes, “The jihadists have only the idea of gaining power and the subsequent widespread of Sharia law.” They understand jihad “exclusively in a military sense” [4, p. 31]. The Afghan Taliban do not share the idea of “universal” widespread of the laws of Islam. They advocate only the preservation of “true” Sharia norms within the borders of their state and resort to military force only to repel outside intervention. At the same time, in case of military necessity, the Taliban do not disdain to receive military, financial and political support from the

<sup>10</sup> This group is prohibited by the law of the Russian Federation.

<sup>11</sup> Terrorist group “Haqqani Network” // RIA Novosti, 09/3/2021: URL: <https://ria.ru/20210903/terroristy-1748579704.html> (accessed 3.01.2022).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> The UN Security Council has added the leader of the Afghan wing of ISIL to the sanctions list // Afghanistan today, 12/22/2021. URL: <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/147529.html> (accessed 5.01.2022).



jihadists, preventing them, however (after the victory), from taking power in their country.

Pakistan played a key role in restoring the combat potential of the Taliban after 2001, providing the leadership of Taliban and its militants with a safe haven where they could organize, train recruits and recuperate. Islamabad was one of the three states that officially recognized the IEA regime in the period 1996–2001. Thus, the important role of Pakistan in the victory of the Taliban in 2021 is beyond doubt.

Today, Pakistan is persuading the leaders of Taliban to speak out in favor of an inclusive government and sever ties with jihadist groups. Islamabad is in a difficult position and has to balance. Islamabad is concerned that “even countries like Iran, China and Russia, which have opted for closer cooperation with the Taliban government, are unlikely to officially recognize it in the near future<sup>14</sup>”. Moreover, we should not expect such a step on the part of the United States and its Western allies.

Some former senior IRA officials have found refuge in Tajikistan, Iran or Turkey. We have no reliable information at our disposal that they are trying to agitate and/or create any organizations in exile to oppose openly the Taliban regime. In any case, if such groups appeared using the factor of interethnic hostility, then their support from neighbors would be a rash step and would provoke another interstate conflict.

The current Taliban administration understands that stable relations with Afghanistan’s closest neighbors in the north (and not only) can be very useful for them. However, with one caveat: none of the states in the region has any desire to repeat the role of Pakistan in nurturing an armed opposition like Taliban or (which is much more dangerous) militant groups – natives of Central Asia who fought as part of ISIS.

At first glance, the military aspect in the life of the country is gradually fading into the background. Economic recovery is on the agenda, but even if the Taliban leadership decides to focus on this issue, it will have to reconsider its personnel policy. Religious authorities and field commanders appointed instead of professional economists and technocrats are unlikely to be able to cope with the task. The situation is such that centrifugal forces threaten the shaky unity in the leadership of the IEA, given that previously field commanders could almost uncontrollably dispose of revenue from customs, drug trafficking and smuggling.

Potential international donors are interested in reasonable economic reforms. Cashflows into the country have dried up, the country’s foreign exchange reserves

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<sup>14</sup> *Pakistan’s Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan // The Crisis Group, Report 320/Asia, 04.02.2022. URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/320-pakistans-hard-policy-choices-afghanistan> (accessed 4.02.2022). After all both Pakistan and China officially call each other “all-weather allies”.*

have been frozen, and UN and US sanctions against the former IRA government are now being applied against the unrecognized Taliban government.

In search of investors, the Taliban turned (among other things) to Moscow, from where Russian representatives arrived in Kabul. According to the Russian side, the issues of mining, construction of oil and gas processing plants, alloy production plants and creation of a cement production company were discussed at the meeting. Representatives of the IEA noted that “there are favorable conditions for investment in Afghanistan<sup>15</sup>”.

Among potential investors, China can undoubtedly be considered the most profitable for Afghanistan and one of the most interested. Literally two weeks after coming to power, the representative of Taliban Z. Mujahid in an interview with the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* stated: “China is our main partner, it represents a fundamental and exceptional opportunity for us, because it is ready to invest in our country and reconstruct it<sup>16</sup>”. As follows from Mujahid’s interview, the Taliban pin their hopes on the implementation of “One Belt – One Road” program, on China’s assistance in restoring the mining industry of Afghanistan.

The same message quoted the words of the Deputy Director of the Political Office of Taliban in Qatar A. Hanafi: “The Afghan Taliban movement is ready to remain committed to the development of friendly relations between Afghanistan and China and will never allow any force to use Afghan territory to threaten China’s interests, and will also take effective measures to ensure the safety of Chinese institutions and personnel in Afghanistan<sup>17</sup>”.

The Foreign Ministers of China and Iran spoke about the need for close coordination of efforts for the peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan. During this conversation, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed hope that the new government of Afghanistan “will show openness and tolerance, completely distance itself from terrorist organizations, and establish and develop good relations with all countries, especially with neighboring ones<sup>18</sup>”.

Of particular note are the following words of Wang Yi, expressed during this conversation: “Although the United States has withdrawn from Afghanistan, it must bear responsibility for the peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan. They should not try to use various means to create new problems there, not to mention causing new unrest and damaging the legitimate rights and interests of neighboring countries.” He further refuted US claims that the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan was aimed at concentrating forces against China and Russia: this is “an attempt to find an excuse for your own failures.” The Minister stressed that “if the United States does not learn the proper les-

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<sup>15</sup> *The Taliban met with investors from Russia in Kabul // RIA Novosti, 3.01.2022. URL: <https://ria.ru/20220103/biznes-1766469222.html> (accessed 5.01.2022).*

<sup>16</sup> *The Taliban called China the main partner of Afghanistan // Interfax, 09.03.2021. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/788319> (accessed 6.01.2022).*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *China and Iran will cooperate in the peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan // Interfax, 4.09.2021. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/788563> (accessed 6.01.2022).*

sons [...], they will inevitably make even more serious mistakes after mistakes in Afghanistan<sup>19</sup>“.

The position of the United States and its European allies is gradually changing towards easing. However, so far only in words, because it is extremely difficult for them to admit the fact that they, being thousands of kilometers away from Afghanistan, have been waging a war for twenty years not against terrorists, but against the population of this country. After all, the United States invaded Afghanistan under the pretext of capturing and destroying Osama bin Laden. CIA Special Forces found him in Pakistan and killed him on May 1, 2011 [3, pp. 13–16]. However, American and NATO troops fought in Afghanistan for another ten years, now having set another task – to impose on the Afghans a way of life that they (Americans and Europeans) consider “democratic“.

From a recent interview with the Russian Special Representative for Afghanistan Z. Kabulov, it follows that, according to him, Taliban “firmly holds all the reins of power“, and “there are fewer and fewer alarming assessments and forecasts [about the humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan].“ He added that the international community is carrying out humanitarian programs in

**The position of the United States and its European allies is gradually changing towards easing.**



terms of assisting the Afghan people, and this fact “indicates a certain increase in confidence in the ruling regime.“ Z. Kabulov said that the members of UN Security Council, including the Russian Federation, “demonstrate a certain flexibility in the issue of lifting sanctions“ and seek to assist the Taliban government “upon completion of the inter-Afghan peace process and formation of an ethnopolitically balanced power structure, as well as unrelenting efforts in the fight against terrorism and drugs<sup>20</sup>“. The statement can shed the light on what exactly Moscow expects from the leaders of Taliban to remove obstacles to recognition of the new regime in Afghanistan.

An unusual situation has developed in the relations of the Russian Foreign Ministry with the IRA Embassy. Representatives of the Taliban intend to send their diplomats to Moscow, despite the fact that their government, as mentioned above, is not recognized by any state. In this regard, the IRA Embassy in the Russian Federation stated that it “works as usual... There is no need for employees from

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> For the full text of the interview, see: Zamir Kabulov: *The CSTO needs to keep its powder dry in the situation with Afghanistan* // *tass.ru*, 31.01.2022. URL: <https://tass.ru/interviews/13572757> (accessed 1.02.2022).

the Taliban in the embassy, especially since the Taliban does not have professional diplomats.“ Meanwhile, the press office of the embassy declared its readiness to “close and cease operations at any time when our services are not in demand by the government of the Russian Federation<sup>21</sup>“.

In all likelihood, this is a reaction to the message that a “Taliban emissary [...] will arrive in Moscow, who plans to take up the post of ambassador of Afghanistan to Russia.“ According to some reports, this man – Jamal Garhwal – is a fellow countryman of the above-mentioned Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the terrorist organization “Haqqani Network“ banned in the Russian Federation<sup>22</sup>“.

The struggle in and around Afghanistan continues. Against this background, a positive fact can be noted: the international community does not give up on stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), established in 2002 “after the United States overthrew the first Taliban government,“ can play a significant role in this direction. As the Crisis Group comments, UNAMA is now acting “as a point of contact for interaction with the new Taliban authorities<sup>23</sup>“.

The mission can also serve as “eyes and ears“ on the ground for external forces and donors, monitoring the human rights situation and coordinating the work of UN agencies responding to the economic and humanitarian crisis in the country. However, there are disagreements in the UN Security Council regarding the priorities of the mission – whether it should focus on human rights issues, on the political aspect of relations or on the predominantly humanitarian one.

Many Western embassies were evacuated. A large number of Afghan employees who held important positions stayed at home or fled the country. Subsequently, many of them returned to work when security concerns abated. The Taliban say they allow humanitarian workers, including women, to work.

It is believed that \$4.4 billion is needed for 2022 to prevent famine in Afghanistan<sup>24</sup>. The Taliban administration claims that they collect customs and other revenues more efficiently than former IRA officials did. These statements, of course, require verification. In such cases, the governments of donor countries have “risks that aid will be stolen, redirected, misused,“ etc. There will be a big scandal if it turns out that aid is being sent from countries whose soldiers once fought with the Taliban.

UNAMA experts make no secret that serious disagreements remain between the members of the UN Security Council over international participation in Afghanistan. Some European members, fearing a new migration crisis, support

<sup>21</sup> *The Embassy of Afghanistan in the Russian Federation does not see the need for new employees from among the Taliban // tass.ru, 1.02.2022. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13585035> (accessed 2.02.2022).*

<sup>22</sup> *A. Serenko. A delegator of the banned Haqqani Network is expected in Russia // Nezavisimaya Gazeta website, 27.01.2022. URL: [https://www.ng.ru/world/2022-01-27/6\\_8357\\_afghanistan.html](https://www.ng.ru/world/2022-01-27/6_8357_afghanistan.html) (accessed 30.01.2022).*

<sup>23</sup> *For details, see: Toward a New Mandate for the UN Mission in Afghanistan // The Crisis group, 28 Jan 2022. URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/toward-new-mandate-un-mission-afghanistan> (accessed 28.01.2022).*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

“fragile Afghan state“. However, this point of view is not shared by everyone. France, for example, “opposes any assistance or participation that could be interpreted as legitimizing the Taliban.“ U.S. officials acknowledge that sanctions undermine humanitarian efforts, but are wary of lifting restrictions on economic activity in Afghanistan<sup>25</sup>.

There are also ongoing disputes over the role of the UN in the field of human rights in Afghanistan. UNAMA representatives write that “China and Russia have long objected to UN missions in other conflict zones monitoring the observance of human rights.“ Others (Europe, the USA and India) “assume a mission that will closely monitor the behavior of the Taliban.“ In any case, UNAMA should serve as a channel of interaction with the Taliban. Its task is to rally interested external forces for effective interaction with the Taliban. Attempts by global players to pursue their own policy in Afghanistan will only worsen the situation and allow extremist elements in Taliban to use differences in approaches to solving problems.

## CONCLUSIONS

It appears from the current situation that Taliban leadership is seeking recognition from key players on the “Afghan field“. In addition, it may happen that by making promises and veiling their most odious postulates, put forward with references to Sharia, the Taliban will eventually receive it.

The imperative requests of some American and European politicians to the Afghan society – to adapt to the model of development of “civilized“ countries – are unlikely to lead to positive results in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan. USA and the West constantly exaggerates the problem of human rights on international platforms, linking it both with politics and with the provision of humanitarian assistance. Their representatives do not miss the opportunity to recall human rights violations in all Central Asian countries, in China, Russia, Iran, etc. In this regard, it is useful to recall the failure in the implementation of the idea of a “melting pot,“ which was promoted by former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (an example of this is the recent rigid collisions in American cities). The policy of multiculturalism, put forward by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, also ended in failure (and she openly admitted it). The Western model of human rights presupposes an accelerated rejection of the centuries-old traditions and way of life of the peoples of “backward“ countries. If it did not work there, then making such requests (similar, rather, to an ultimatum) that sound like “here and now“ is at least absurd.

The Governments of the Central Asian States clearly assess the danger of a smoldering conflict on their borders and are ready to contribute in every pos-

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

sible way to the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan and the region. Moreover, Taliban has repeatedly stated before that its leaders have no intention of transferring the conflict to neighboring countries.

The forced disorderly departure (rather resembling flight) of foreign armed forces from Afghanistan confirms, strange as it may seem, the rightness of the Taliban, who did not seize the territory of the country, but returned to their homeland, having expelled foreign invaders.

Currently, the United States and the West also seem to be inclined to help stabilize the situation and are preparing – gradually, indirectly, through international structures – to begin establishing relations with the new regime in Afghanistan. It will be a difficult process, accompanied by mutual accusations, threats and former routine reproaches against Taliban about human rights violations and complicity in terrorism.

The international community, represented at the UN, undoubtedly has an important role to play in settling the Afghan conflict, eliminating its negative consequences and providing comprehensive assistance to the people of Afghanistan.

At the same time, it is necessary to pay attention to another extremely disturbing circumstance that can become an obstacle in the process of stabilizing the situation in the country and the region. The fact is that for twenty years of being on Afghan territory, the US army managed to create a network of private military companies (PMCs) with personnel recruited mainly from Afghans. It is quite natural that a large number of the commanders of these PMCs are under the control of various American structures<sup>26</sup>.

The step to stabilize the situation in the country and the region cannot be one-sided. The Interim Government of Afghanistan, represented by the Taliban, must assume (and fulfill) the above-mentioned basic obligations: a) the formation of an inclusive government; b) the rejection of discrimination against the “non-titular” nationalities of the country; c) a decisive and final rupture of relations with terrorist groups.

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<sup>26</sup> A. Knyazev *Long-term uncertainty and prospects of escalation of the military-political conflict in Afghanistan. Part II // Center for Socio-Economic and Geopolitical Studies, March 2022. URL: <https://csegr.ru/afghan-crisis-part-2/> (accessed 14.03.2022).*

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# PROBLEMS OF DECENTRALIZATION OF POWER IN AFGHANISTAN:

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND MODERN DILEMMAS

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### ABSTRACT

The article discusses the efforts of various ethno-political forces of Afghanistan to decentralize state power. The author focuses on the conditions and prerequisites for the emergence of the idea and various projects of decentralization. At the same time, the author analyzes the history of the emergence of the idea of federalism in Afghanistan, the number of supporters of which is growing after the Taliban movement came to power in August 2021.

The article also notes the fact that there is no consensus on both the types of federation and the territory of its subjects. It is emphasized that, despite the increase in the number of supporters of decentralization, almost among the entire Pashtun elite (regardless of ideological orientations) and part of non-Pashtun ethnic groups, decentralization, especially the federalization of Afghanistan, is associated with the disintegration of the country into different states, which makes it impossible to implement this idea.

### KEYWORDS

Afghanistan, centralization, decentralization, federalism, federation, interethnic relations, Pashtuns, non-Pashtun ethnic groups, political system, form of government.



## INTRODUCTION

The problem of decentralization of power in Afghanistan remains relevant due to the armed conflict that has been going on for more than four decades with distinct contours of interethnic conflict. The return of Taliban<sup>1</sup> to power in August 2021 and the formation of a predominantly mono-ethnic (Pashtun) government in multinational Afghanistan led to the activation of supporters of the idea of decentralization of power in Afghanistan.

The problems of interethnic relations and representation of ethnic groups in government, the emergence of the idea of decentralization and its evolution have become the subject of research by political scientists, historians, lawyers and other specialists. Both in analytical circles, including academic ones, and in social networks, a broad discussion is unfolding about the future of the Afghan political system and various models of decentralization of power.

Russian scientist V. Ya. Belokrenitsky, who studies the issues of special adherence of Pashtuns to tribal traditions specified in the famous code of rules and customs of “Pashtunwali” [1], their number and settlement [2], notes that in Afghanistan each ethnic group has its own tribesmen in neighboring countries and identifies itself with the name of these countries. This issue is addressed in an article by Carl Brien and David Anderson [3]. I. Bobokulov’s article deals directly with the issue of decentralization and centralization in Afghanistan [4]. The paper of Ghufran Badakhshani on the program of one of the founders of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) M. T. Badakhshi on the federal structure of Afghanistan appears to be interesting [5]. The project of decentralization of Afghanistan, developed by the “Parcham” faction of the PDPA in the 70s of the past century, is considered in the collective paper of Soviet authors [6], as well as in the memoirs of one of the leaders of the PDPA S. A. Keshtmand [7].

Already in the 80s, the Soviet leadership invited the legendary field commander Ahmad Shah Massoud to discuss the creation of Tajik autonomy within the Republic of Afghanistan. This is discussed in the paper of A. Lyakhovsky [8]. The article by K. Iskandarov and A. Shekhov is devoted to the emergence of the idea of federalism [9].

Back in the early 90s, some political parties representing non-Pashtun ethnic groups put forward the issue of decentralization of the country as program goals. This was reflected in the opening speech of the head of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (NIMA) Abdul-Rashid Dostum at the First Founding Congress of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan [10]. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime, during the discussion of the draft of the new constitution of Afghanistan, supporters of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan widely discussed and proposed parliamentarism as the optimal option for the future political system of Afghanistan [11]. Of course, the statements of Ahmad Masood Jr. [12], who heads the National Resistance Front, as well as analytical

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<sup>1</sup> A terrorist organization banned in Tajikistan.

articles by Ali Maysam Nazari [13], Zia Sarwari [14], Abdul Lalzad [15], Zabeullah Sayi [16] are important for analyzing a wide range of opinions and ideas offered by Afghan experts and other experts today.

### THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

is to analyze the historical prerequisites for the emergence and development of the idea of decentralization of political power in Afghanistan, to identify the factors that contributed to activation of supporters of decentralization.

### RESEARCH METHOD

The paper uses the historical research method, the method of comparative analysis and other research methods.

### RESULTS

Afghanistan is a multinational country. Experts list 50 ethnic groups speaking 33 languages. Of this number, the main or most numerous ethnic groups are Pashtuns, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Baluchis, Turkmens, who make up more than 90% of the country's population. All the main ethnic groups of this country (except for Tajiks) are characterized to some extent by a tribal structure, however, as V. Ya. Belokrenitsky writes: "the Pashtuns stand out for their special adherence to tribal traditions specified in the famous code of rules and customs "Pashtunwali" [1]. Tribes, in turn, are divided into clans, hailies, ancestry and other small divisions. For example, according to V. Ya. Belokrenitsky, "the Pashtun area of Afghanistan includes a zone of traditional settlement of a large number of tribes, their divisions and clans. According to tradition, historically there were 405 tribes, but due to their fragmentation, there were about 1.7 thousand tribes and independent subdivisions [heilei] by the 1980s" [2].

Each of these ethnic groups is better known by the names of other countries than by the name of the country of residence – Afghanistan. The Pashtuns, for example, are better known for their Pashtun tribesmen in Pakistan. According to Carl Brien and David Anderson, "this individual identity has led to the fact that Afghans prefer to consider themselves members of a certain ethnic group and think about their own ethnic group rather than about the country as a citizen of Afghanistan" [3].

Intertribal and interethnic contradictions and conflicts have often been observed in the history of Afghanistan. Each of these conflicts contributed to the division and discord in the country, and this led to the fact that each ethnic group is looking for a national leader only among its own people. The geography of Afghanistan, undoubtedly, also plays a significant role in the division of ethnic groups.

In this complex ethnic conglomerate that has developed since the formation of the Afghan state in 1747 (except for short period in 1929 and from 1992 to 1996), all power in the country belongs to the Pashtuns, and the Pashtuns consider themselves a state-forming nation with an exclusive right to supreme power. The

twenty-year period of Afghanistan's democratic development (2001–2021) has shown that the Pashtun elite is ready to take any measures, including falsifying election results, in order to preserve political power exclusively for the Pashtuns.

At the same time, in recent decades, especially during the stay of the so-called Limited contingent of Soviet troops in Afghanistan and the civil war in that country, the degree of national consciousness, the military and political potential of the non-Pashtun peoples and their determination to ensure their rights to govern the state has significantly increased.

The non-Pashtun elite sees one of the ways to achieve the rights to govern the country in the decentralization of power. However, the Pashtuns, regardless of differences in political and ideological orientation, oppose the decentralization of power in any form and consider this a prerequisite to the division of the country into independent states. At the same time, it was the political elite of the Pashtuns, with their policy and desire to monopolize power, that contributed to the fact that a certain consensus was formed among non-Pashtun politicians on the problem of decentralization of political power. The entire history of Afghanistan, especially the armed confrontation of recent decades and political instability in this country caused constant fluctuations between the policy of centralization and decentralization. As I. Bobokulov writes, "The formation and development of multinational statehood (Afghanistan. – **K. I.**) can be considered as the history of the struggle between decentralization and centralization" [4, p. 120].

In the 60s of the XX century, one of the founders of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) M. T. Badakhshi believed that the main contradiction of Afghan society, along with class, contradiction is the existing national oppression (*setame melle*). In his opinion, ensuring social justice and equality in society is impossible without solving the national issue, or, according to the author, "eradicating national oppression." That is why the wing of the "Circle of Expectation" detached of PDPA and Revolutionary Organization of the Workers of Afghanistan (ROWA) formed on its basis, were informally called "National Oppression," and the members of this organization were called "setame" ("oppressed").

M. T. Badakhshi was one of the first to propose the idea of a federal structure of Afghanistan. In 1973, in the draft program of his organization, he outlined in detail the content of the idea of federalism. Article 6 of the draft reads: "The peoples of the country who have their own history, territory, language, stable economic and cultural ties, have the right to self-determination from a political, economic and cultural point of view. This is their natural right, they have the right to fight for it right up to secession." Article 15 reads as follows: "As to solving the national issue with the aim of voluntary and real union of peoples and expanding the struggle of the masses for the socio-economic development of the country, we advocate

AT THE SAME TIME, IT WAS THE POLITICAL ELITE OF THE PASHTUNS, WITH THEIR POLICY AND DESIRE TO MONOPOLIZE POWER, THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE FACT THAT A CERTAIN CONSENSUS WAS FORMED AMONG NON-PASHTUN POLITICIANS ON THE PROBLEM OF DECENTRALIZATION OF POLITICAL POWER.

the creation of a democratic state like a federal republic in which all the ethnic groups of the country, such as Tajiks, Pashtuns, Hazaras, Turkmens, Nuristans, Baluchis, etc. using the right to self-determination will create their own republics by the name of their people on their historical territories.“ However, article 17 of the draft program referred to the name of a united or federal state, which “has no direct relation to any of the nationalities“ [5].

The “Parcham“ faction of the PDPA under the leadership of Muhammad Daoud, in connection with the development of the draft Basic Law of the Republic of Afghanistan in 1976, prepared its own draft, which contained a

**In 1992, the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (NIMA) was established under the leadership of ethnic Uzbek Abdul-Rashid Dustum.**

provision on optimization of national relations. According to the author of this draft, S. A. Keshtmand “the draft proposed by ‘Parcham’, was based on a system of parliamentarism with elements of federalism“ [6]. In the collective monograph “Topical issues of the April Revolution,“ Soviet scientists claim that in the recommendations presented, the Parcham put forward the idea of creating an independent administrative-territorial region in the Pashtun settlement zone (from Kunar to Helmand) with the inclusion of Nuristan as an autonomous region. Other administrative-territorial units were proposed to be created as follows:

- Uzbek settlement zone (Juzjan, Balkh, Samangon regions);
- Tajiks settlement zone (Takhar, Badakhshan, Kunduz, Baghlan);
- central districts from Kabul to Herat with the autonomous district of the Hazaras;
- south-western regions (provinces of Farah, Nimruz with the autonomous district of Baluchi) [7].

According to S. A. Keshtmand, after the April Revolution of 1978, the Council of Ministers of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) “put forward concrete proposals for the adoption of principle of national autonomy for those peoples who needed it most“ [6, p. 283].

Within the framework of the national reconciliation program (perhaps to attract Ahmad Shah Massoud to the side of the government), proposals have appeared to discuss the issue of granting the right of autonomy to the Tajiks of northeastern Afghanistan. A. A. Lyakhovsky writes that the military command, using the conspiratorial connection with Masood, sent Ahmad Shah questions for discussion, which were certified with the appropriate signatures and sealed with the seal of the Soviet embassy in Afghanistan. Among the issues to be discussed with Ahmad Shah, in particular, were: “creation of Tajik autonomy within the

framework of a unified Afghanistan on the basis of the areas of residence of Tajiks with the inclusion of the territories of the provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz, Baghlan and parts of Parvan and Kapisa, the forms of self-government of this area, as well as representation of Tajiks in government and specific positions in the office of the President, in the National Council and the Cabinet of Ministers of Afghanistan“ [8, p. 664]. The General Secretary of the Central Committee of the ruling PDPA party, Mohammad Najibullah, probably could not refuse the Soviet ambassador to negotiate on this topic, but it is unlikely that he could make such concessions to Ahmad Shah Massoud.

“Therefore, every time they agreed on a meeting with Masoud, it was disrupted on the instructions of Najibullah by bombing and assault strikes at place of meeting“ [8, pp. 664–665; 9]. Thus, at that time there was no complete clarity about the reaction of Ahmad Shah Massoud to the proposals regarding granting the right of autonomy only to Tajiks. However, in 2001, during his trip to Europe, Ahmad Shah Massoud stated the following: “The choice of the system is the right of the people, but federalism is not in the interests of the Afghan people and will lead to the collapse of [the country]“ [15]. With the approach of the fall of Dr. Najibullah’s regime, the issue of the formation of federal state was again raised by some political forces of the country representing non-Pashtun ethnic groups.

In 1992, the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (NIMA) was established under the leadership of ethnic Uzbek Abdul-Rashid Dustum. In his report at the Founding Congress of the NIMA in Mazar-I-Sharif, he stated: “We want to solve the national question by creating a federal state“ [10, p. 44]. The item “Creation of a federal state based on Islam“ was also included in the NIMA program.

The idea of federalism was also popular among the Hazaras, who, unlike other ethnic groups, are settled in Central Afghanistan, or Hazarajat, relatively compactly. The program of the Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan (IUPA) under the leadership of Ali Mazari also contained the principle of creating a federal state in Afghanistan.

After the Mujahideen came to power, contradictions between ethnopolitical groups intensified, which led to the beginning of military clashes between them. As a result, Afghanistan was unofficially divided into several separate administrative regions that did not obey the central government until they came under the control of the Taliban.

After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, when the issue of creating the future political system of Afghanistan was discussed on the Internet and in the press, the idea of decentralization, including the federalism model, was again raised by some political forces.

At the same time, it should be noted that over the years, serious changes have taken place in the views of supporters of the idea of federalism. Political organizations that previously advocated a federal structure of Afghanistan have declared their commitment to a parliamentary form of government.

This has left its mark on the campaign to discuss and adopt a new Constitution of Afghanistan. The form of the political system and powers of the President of

**SUPPORTERS OF THE CREATION OF A PARLIAMENTARY REPUBLIC IN AFGHANISTAN WERE REPRESENTED BY THE ELITE OF NON-PASHTUN ETHNIC GROUPS, WHO WERE SURE THAT IF A PRESIDENTIAL FORM WAS ESTABLISHED, PASHTUNS WOULD ALWAYS BE IN POWER, GIVEN THE BROAD POWERS OF PRESIDENT PROVIDED FOR BY THE CONSTITUTION.**

Afghanistan was one of the most controversial issues that arose during the discussion of the draft Constitution. Even before the convening of the Loya Jirga, the most discussed issue was “which form of government, presidential or parliamentary, is the most optimal for Afghanistan.” Supporters of the presidential form of government led by H. Karzai, his ministers and representatives close to him in the Loya Jirga fought for a strong, broad-based power of president. The head of transitional government, H. Karzai, even issued an ultimatum, saying that he would run in the next presidential elections in Afghanistan only if the presidential form of government was fixed in the Constitution.

Supporters of the presidential form of government argued that the parliamentary system divides a single, centralized state, creates various centers of power. Supporters of the creation of a parliamentary republic in Afghanistan were represented by the elite of non-Pashtun ethnic groups, who were sure that if a presidential form was established, Pashtuns would always be in power, given the broad powers of president provided for by the Constitution. The weekly Mujahid, the press organ of the Islamic Society of Afghanistan Party, wrote in its editorial that “under

the presidential system, all branches of government are under the control of the president, who is not accountable to parliament. The people’s representatives received seats in parliament through the free expression of the will of the people, but the president, if desired, can dissolve the parliament and dismiss the Prime Minister and the entire government“ [11]. Therefore, representatives of non-Pashtun ethnic groups, both Islamists and supporters of a secular state, advocated a parliamentary system of government. The Islamic Society of Afghanistan Party has officially proposed a parliamentary system as the country’s future political system.

Undoubtedly, representatives of the United States and the international community as a whole preferred the presidential form of government, and this support led to the consolidation of the presidential system in the Afghan Constitution.

Thus, during the development and discussion of the draft Constitution of Afghanistan in 2003–2004, the choice was mainly between the parliamentary and presidential form of government. Federalization of Afghanistan was not an urgent task at that time. After the overthrow of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, in one of his interviews, Z. Khalilzad claimed that in 2003 none of the leaders of political parties raised this issue, although he, as a representative of a federal state, was not against it and insisted only on a presidential form of government. At that time, the only party that officially called for the creation of a federal state and adopted this provision as a strategy for its activities was the Party of the National Congress of Afghanistan (PNCA) under the chairmanship of L. Pedrom. The item on the creation of a federal state was included in the

program of the presidential candidate, chairman of this party A. Pedram at the first presidential elections in 2004.

During the two decades of presidential rule, the main political parties that defended the interests of non-Pashtun ethnic groups did not seriously raise the issue of decentralization of political power in Afghanistan. Only in the last presidential elections, Abdullah Abdullah's team included the issue of introducing the post of prime minister in the future government in the election program.

Meanwhile, with the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States and his announcement of the possible withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, Afghanistan's future political system has become the subject of numerous discussions in the West. The issues of federalization and even the division of Afghanistan into North and South were very actively discussed. The idea of dividing Afghanistan was proposed by the former US Ambassador to India, Blackville, as the only way out of the situation of war and violence in Afghanistan. The plan was first proposed by Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, and Paddy Ashdown, a former British politician and member of the Liberal Democrats. It was first published in the Guardian newspaper in September 2009 as "Plan B." But in Afghanistan, either they were not familiar with this plan, or they did not take it seriously. Nevertheless, among a wide range of opinions, ideas and projects regarding the decentralization of power, there are also proposals for the division of the country. Supporters of this idea are sure that the Pashtun elite will never agree to the establishment of federalism. Therefore, in their opinion, the best option is to divide this country.

The active development of the idea of decentralization of power among the main non-Pashtun ethnic groups was facilitated by the growing trend of discrimination against the non-Pashtun elite, conducted by President A. Ghani, the obvious falsification of election results in favor of representatives of the titular nation, etc. An example was the relationship of President A. Ghani with First Vice-President A. R. Dustum, who spent a whole year in "political exile" in Turkey, or the resignation of the governor of Balkh province A. M. Nur. A significant part of the Tajik elite in Afghanistan, especially representatives of the intellectual class, opposed the fact that in electronic passports in the column "Ethnic origin" all residents of Afghanistan were recorded as Afghans.

In addition, the Statistics Department of Afghanistan attributed the Persian dialect and the Tajik language to foreign in the forms for obtaining a passport in the column "Knowledge of foreign languages," which caused widespread protests by the Tajiks of Afghanistan, as a result of which this innovation was excluded.

Another step of A. Ghani was an artificial and unscientific division of non-Pashtun peoples into sub-ethnoses and their separation from the main ethnic group – Tajik, Uzbek, etc. For example, Tajiks were divided into Sodot, Pamiri, Munjani, sanglechi, Ishkashimi, Rushani, Vakhani, Shugnani, Sakai, Yaftali, etc. It is noteworthy that this principle has not been applied to numerous Pashtun tribes. Some representatives of non-Pashtun peoples perceived this as an attempt to create the status of an "ethnic majority" for Pashtuns.

As the deadline for the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan after the signing of the Doha Agreement approached, the desire to mobilize people's militias to protect their territories intensified among some non-Pashtun peoples, especially Uzbeks and Hazaras. Some of their representatives started talking about the creation of autonomous formations on their territories. For example, in Mayman, the center of Faryaba province, separatist slogans were heard during a protest demonstration against the appointment of an ethnic Pashtun from the south to the post of governor of the province. According to some reports, the spread of such slogans accelerated the decision by President A. Ghani on the "tactical retreat" of army units and the surrender of all counties from Badakhshan to Herat to the Taliban.

Taliban's takeover and formation of a government exclusively from among the Taliban and predominantly Pashtuns strengthened the determination of the absolute majority of the elite of the main non-Pashtun ethnic groups to achieve decentralization of power. The expansion of the discussion on the decentralization of the political system was also influenced by the words of US President J. Biden, who said that it is impossible to unite the current Afghanistan into a single state – "if you think that someone can unite Afghanistan into a single state, raise your hand," he said.

However, according to some Taliban leaders, the United States planned to divide Afghanistan into two parts after the withdrawal of troops. As reported by TASS, at the meeting of tribal elders in Kabul the representative of the radicals Shahabuddin Delawar said that the United States planned to divide the country ethnically during the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, but their plans failed due to the actions of the Taliban. "The United States sought to divide Afghanistan into ethnic groups, but as a result of the wise and balanced policy of our leaders, the Taliban managed to prevent this tragedy" [21].





The issue of decentralization is currently being promoted mainly through social networks and is turning into a serious discussion. Various ideas are being put forward – from a federal and parliamentary system to a confederation. Opinions are also expressed on the need for division of powers between the Center and the provinces. Moreover, there are opinions about the division of the country into independent states.

Pavel Astakhov, for example, is sure that there is no need to preserve this country. “The division of Afghanistan <...> will solve all regional problems,” he writes [22]. Here is one of the variant of division, in which, according to him, “he did not take into account the small peoples of the Eastern Province and expanded the territory of the Shiites, which is much more to the west.”



At the same time, many of the plans and schemes presented are far from perfect and do not take into account the complexity of perplexity of socio-ethnic groups and the peculiarities of the settlement of ethnic groups in Afghanistan.

It appears from the volume of publications and the spread of opinions that unlike the beginning of the XXI century, the number of so-called federalists has increased. But if back then the supporters of the largest (mainly Tajik) party, the Islamic Society of Afghanistan, advocated a parliamentary system, today some members of the ISA are already advocate for federal form of government. The leader of the National Resistance Front, Ahmad Masood, in his address to the participants of the conference dedicated to his father Ahmad Shah Masood at Cambridge University, stated the need for decentralization of power in Afghanistan. “We are confident that today the decentralization of the political and administrative system (in Afghanistan) is the best way to determine our future. With such a system, all ethnic groups in the country will be able to elect their own local leaders who will be accountable to the people, and thus will be able to take an active part in shaping policy at the local and regional levels,” he said [12].

And although Ahmad Masood did not speak specifically about the federal reconstruction of Afghanistan at the time, later the head of the Foreign Relations department of the National Resistance Front, Ali Maysam Nazari, said that “despite the fact that the Front’s program has not yet been finalized, nevertheless, the federal system is the only institutional mechanism that can contain crises in Afghanistan and play a key role in the process of the country’s development... The decentralization of power, the federalization of Afghanistan meet the interests of all peoples,” he said [13].

The part of ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras are still supporting the idea of federalism and their political organizations have developed specific projects for the federalization of the country. The Chairman of the NCA, L. Pedram, in the manuscript of his vision of the future form of government in Afghanistan presented to the author of these lines, writes that “the political system proposed by us is a federal republic.” At the same time, he notes that the system can be “presidential-federal” or “parliamentary-federal.” However, the “parliamentary-federal” system is more preferable for L. Pedram, since it has more opportunities for the democratization of society. L. Pedram’s plan describes all the details and basic principles of choosing the president of a federal state, his powers; specifies the powers of the Prime Minister, who heads the executive branch and can be nominated by a political party or coalition in the lower house of parliament, and the president provides the candidate to the parliament for approval.

In NCA’s draft, the parliament in a federal state consists of two chambers – the Council of Representatives and the Senate. However, the analysis of the entire program of L. Pedram is beyond the scope of this article. I would just like to mention L. Pedram’s vision regarding the division of power between the center and the states (or zones). According to his plan, Afghanistan will be divided into 8 or 10 states, or zones, as it was in the 1960s and 1970s. It is assumed that each state will have its own parliament, whose members are elected in free, general and secret elections. At a meeting of the state Parliament, the head of the state, or *ustandar*, will be elected from among its members by a majority of votes. The competence of the center, states and provinces will be defined in the Constitution of the country. L. Pedram believes that there is no alternative to decentralizing the political system to ensure peace, stability and equality of the peoples living in Afghanistan. At the same time, he claims that he has three options for the implementation of this plan: federation, confederation (based on the division of the country into North and South) and partition of the country. L. Pedram has several options for formation of the subjects of the federation, including approves the following scheme developed by A. Lazard, although the author of this scheme himself is no longer sure that such an option of creating a state can serve the interests of Tajiks.



Supporters of the idea of federalism are confident that only federation can ensure equal participation of all ethnic groups in the governance of the state, as well as the preservation of their ethnic and cultural identity, language and traditions, since all issues of regional development are transferred by the federal government to the competence of the subjects of the federation. At the same time, issues of defense and security, war and peace, foreign policy, etc. remain within the competence of the Federal Government.

The “Federal Democratic Movement” (Federal demokrat movement) was formed among some representatives of the Hazars, which developed a document called “The Project of Resistance and State-building.” This 11-page document containing a plan for the federal arrangement of the country was dated February 7, 2022. The Project of Movement contains step-by-step measures aimed at organizing resistance to terrorist groups, carrying out fundamental reforms affecting a wide range of issues – from changing the name of the country to the political system and the national currency of the country. According to the Movement’s plan, “three phenomena should be eradicated in Afghanistan: fascism, terrorism and centralized tribal form of government.” According to the plan, the future name of the federal state is Khorasan, which consists of 9 federal units, or subjects [14].

There is no consensus on the subjects of the federation. The initiators of the projects of the federal arrangement of the country have different views, differing both in the number of states or zones, and in the territory that they should cover.

Afghan expert Z. Sarvari on the Facebook page “Keepers of Khorasan identity, History and Culture” lists a number of advantages of federalism. In particular, he states: “The federal system will contribute to the unity and solidarity of our people and will save the country from the threat of disintegration, war and poverty, changes the roots and basis of mono-ethnic, fanatical and authoritarian governments, creates power of the people, will put an end to centuries-old oppression and tyranny in the country, will benefit the preservation and development of different languages and cultures in the a multilingual country, where different ethnic groups

and nationalities live together, stimulates a fair distribution of power and wealth in all regions and federal territories of the country, can lead to economic growth.“ [15] However, the Afghan expert Dr. A. Lalzad, who lives in London, considers such a characterization of federalism an exaggeration that can be found “only in ‘poetic utopias,’ but not in the real world and not in the 25 existing federal states of the planet“ [16]. In another article, he argues that “the federal system does not guarantee the democratization of society. There are many federal states in the world that are not considered democratic. An example is the Russian Federation (RF), the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (IRP), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), etc.“ [17]. According to A. Lalzad, there are two types of federalism in general. The first is geographical (territorial), which is based on the union of independent states or countries to create a strong central government. The second is ethnic/linguistic/religious, which is based on the transfer of relative powers to ethnic/linguistic/religious groups to prevent separatist sentiments. But in Afghanistan, both types of federalism are impractical and there are no conditions for their creation. At the same time, A. Lalzad proposes to implement decentralization (horizontal and vertical) by redistributing power on the basis of the “principle of self-government“: elected/accountable governors and civil rights based on fair laws and the rule of law within the existing 34 provinces [17].

Many experts recognize the urgent issue of decentralization of power and consider federalization one of the best options for multiethnic countries. At the same time, given some of the peculiarities of Afghanistan, they doubt that federalization can be the best option for solving the problems of Afghanistan. For example, Afghan expert Zabehullah Sayi believes that “It is impossible to create federal state on territorial and geographical principles without clear borders between regions (except for Hindukush, which divides Afghanistan into North and South). The creation of federal structures of the state based on such cultural components as language and the choice of religious denomination also cannot be considered reasonable, since the speakers of the most common languages (Persian and Pashto) are geographically scattered throughout the country and are not concentrated in specific regions or districts. From a confessional point of view, there is also a huge difference in the number of followers of each denomination (Sunnis and Shiites. – **K. I.**), which also makes the confessional principle practically irrational.“ Zabehullah Sayi believes that the only component that to some extent can become a rational basis for the creation of federal entities is “ethnicity.“ The creation of a federal structure based on this component may be useful for the decentralization of power, but it is also associated with the settlement of ethnic groups, especially the two main ones – Tajik and Pashtun – throughout the country (from North to South and from East to West) – the expert believes. “Therefore, it is practically impossible to implement this principle without the resettlement of ethnic groups, which is impossible in principle,“ explains Zabehullah Sayi. The author comes to the conclusion that it is not only incorrect to identify decentralization with federalism and consider federalism the only way to solve the country’s problems, but also “can be considered an excessive

idealism“ [18]. Thus, the absolute majority of experts consider the creation of a federation based on ethnic principles to be erroneous, since there is always a possibility of strengthening centrifugal aspirations and separatism among one or another ethnic group. At the same time, the type of territorial federalism is considered more optimal than ethnic federalism [3].

**Many experts recognize the urgent issue of decentralization of power and consider federalization one of the best options for multiethnic countries.**

Despite the heated discussions around the issue of decentralization of Afghanistan, almost the entire Pashtun elite (regardless of ideological orientation) and some non-Pashtun ethnic groups traditionally associate this idea with the division of the country into different states. At the time, Ashraf Ghani, in response to proposals for the formation of a parliamentary system in Afghanistan, stressed that “Afghanistan is not a laboratory created for everyone who wants to set up an experiment“ [19].

Moreover, if such an idea is proposed by a representative of any other state, then he is immediately accused of interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. Although, as Alex Thier notes, “the discussion of decentralization should be understood as an attempt to increase the inclusiveness and participation of the local population in government, strengthen political and social cohesion and economic development“ [20].

In this regard, the most difficult issue is the mechanism for implementing the idea of decentralization of power. It is difficult to find an easy solution to the issue in conditions of conflict and in an atmosphere of distrust and hostility. If an armed confrontation begins in Afghanistan again, there is a possibility of creating regional “centers of power,“ as it was in the 90s of the last century, which is unlikely to lead to any acceptable result. It is worth reminding that during that period, some neighboring countries feared the collapse of the country, fearing the Tajik Islamic armed opposition in Afghanistan in conditions when ethnic Tajiks were in power. This brought well-known geopolitical risks to neighboring states. The disintegration of Afghanistan into several independent states, of course, cannot but have an impact on neighboring countries.

## CONCLUSIONS

The complicated military-political situation and the protracted armed conflict, the desire of certain political circles to monopolize power in Afghanistan have complicated interethnic relations. This has led to the activation of supporters of the decentralization of power, hoping for the optimization of interethnic relations, ensuring equal rights for various ethnic groups in the governance of the state, the



development of language and the preservation of ethno-cultural identity. Some experts and politicians believe that today, when the Taliban has established its power without taking into account the ethnic, geographical, cultural, economic, gender and other characteristics of Afghanistan, there is no other way but to change this system and adopt a federal form of government.

At the same time, in the conditions of non-acceptance of this idea by the Pashtuns and against the background of the specific features of the settlement of various ethnic groups on the territory of the country, the implementation of this idea faces insurmountable difficulties.

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# THE CHALLENGE OF INCLUSIVE GOVERNMENT IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE WAYS OF ITS SOLUTION



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## **ABSTRACT**

The article attempts to analyze the problem of creating an inclusive government in Afghanistan, which is one of the key requirements for international recognition of the Taliban and the new Afghan government. The main differences in the positions of the Taliban and the international community and, first of all, the United States, lie in a different conceptual understanding of the nature of «inclusive government» and inclusive political institutions. At the same time, two hypotheses are submitted for consideration, which, in the author's opinion, have a possible impact on the Taliban's understanding of the use of political inclusiveness, and the essence of which lies in the peculiarities of the Taliban's perception of their political opponents such as the United States, the former Afghan government and the political groups of ethnic minorities, as well as the features of the Afghan political culture based on the historical dominance of extractive political and economic institutions. The article considers four possible options for further action by the Taliban regarding the likelihood of introducing inclusive political institutions in the foreseeable future.

## **KEYWORDS**

Taliban, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, inclusive government, frame, inclusive political institutions, extractive economic institutions, Pashtunwali, new Afghans, social contract.



## INTRODUCTION

Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021, which followed immediately after the withdrawal of American troops and the collapse of the government of Ashraf Ghani and his law enforcement agencies, radically changed the entire architecture of security, economy, trade and balance of power that developed and functioned in the country and in the region after 2001. Currently, the Taliban, the countries bordering Afghanistan and the world's leading players and institutions are looking for ways to create a new coordinate system in bilateral and multilateral relations, but for a number of reasons they have not yet been able to do this in full.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The article uses an interdisciplinary approach based on the methods of historical, ethno-cultural, axiological, content and frame analysis, as well as methods of assessing political and economic culture in terms of neo-institutional theory.

## THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

One of the most serious problems that still does not allow Afghanistan to reach a stable trajectory of development and fully integrate into the international financial and economic system, and the new Afghan authorities to gain international recognition, is the inability of the Taliban to find points of convergence with the United States and the collective West on a number of fundamental issues concerning the nature of government formation, respect for human rights and the freedoms of national minorities and women, the complete eradication of terrorist groups on the territory of the country and the cessation of drug production.

There might not have been any problems with the recognition of the new authorities if the Taliban had initially agreed to the option of forming a coalition government with their opponents, i.e. Ashraf Ghani's government and Afghan ethnopolitical groups. However, the Taliban rejected this option, and today all that is left to do is to speculate why its leaders did not seek compromise solutions that would create an inclusive government and an inclusive political system. In this case, two hypotheses can be put forward.

The first hypothesis is that the Taliban have always considered the government of Hamid Karzai, Ashraf Ghani and ethno-political groups as dependent force whose survival depends only on external support. They viewed their military-political and ideological struggle primarily as a confrontation with external interventionists who controlled official Afghan authorities and law enforcement agencies. That is why the Taliban conducted a diplomatic dialogue and negotiations with the United States, as with the main opponent, while at the same time refusing to conduct a bilateral dialogue with official Kabul.

The second hypothesis explaining the reason for the Taliban's refusal to create a coalition government was the cultural features of internal Afghan politics, in the history of which there have never been examples of inclusive political institutions. American neo-institutional economists D. Ajemoglu and J. Robinson define inclusive political institutions as institutions that "ensure a broad distribution of

political power and at the same time allow achieving such a degree of political centralization that guarantees law and order, the preservation of property rights and an inclusive market economy“ [1].

It is obvious that there has never been a broad distribution of political power in the history of Afghanistan according to the West, although certain elements of political inclusiveness could still be observed in the period 2001–2021. The political tradition of this country is characterized by extractive political institutions, in the functioning of which the ruling groups are interested, to which competing groups of counter-elites seek access and control, since it is these groups that open access to the development of extractive economic institutions distinguished by maximization of the income of a narrow circle of individuals or clans.

**It was quite expected that the United States and leading external donors would no longer make such generous injections into the Afghan budget, taking into account the refusal of the Taliban to compromise on the creation of an inclusive government, protection of women’s rights, including their right to work and education.**

The extractive nature of Afghan traditional politics explains its uncompromising nature and its focus on eliminating competitors from the political arena in order to assert the right of the strongest. An example is the civil war between the Mujahideen groups (1992–1996) after the fall of the regime of President Mohammad Najibullah. The Taliban is also no exception to the rule, being a vivid example of the traditional Afghan political culture. The effect of extractivity, apparently, can also be explained by the observed Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan, which serves as an obstacle to the construction of inclusive multiethnic political institutions.

At the same time, despite the existence of various hypotheses, it can be stated that the Taliban, after coming to power, in the language of sociology, fell into a completely different frame of Afghan politics. Russian sociologist Viktor Vakhstein defines a frame as “the structure of a situation“ and “a rigid framework of human interaction“ [2]. If before August 2021, the Taliban were within the framework of a military-political confrontation with the government of Ashraf Ghani, the United States, and their allies as a movement whose actions were based on the principles of guerrilla warfare, then after August 2021 they fell into the frame of the ruling force, which required a radical change in the entire model of the movement’s functioning.

Their transition from the frame of the guerrilla movement to the frame of the ruling force means that the Taliban needs not only to change the psychology of their command and rank-and-file personnel, previously oriented and motivated

to confront the central authorities, but also to take on the solution of a huge array of problems and challenges that Afghan society faces daily and which the government of Ashraf Ghani previously tried to solve.

At the same time, there is one fundamental difference: the Taliban does not have the financial safety cushion that the former authorities had in the form of assistance from external donors. According to the data of New York Times, foreign grants formed 75% of the Afghan budget and 45% of GDP [3].

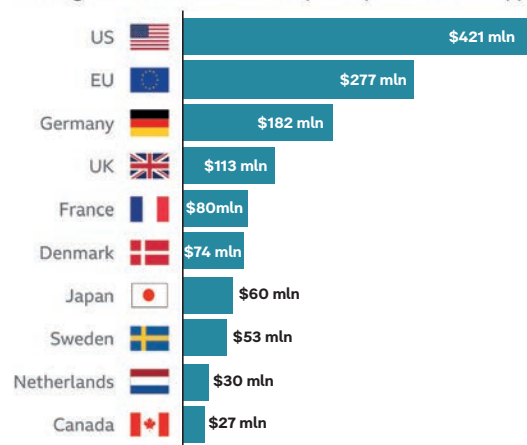
It was quite expected that the United States and leading external donors would no longer make such generous injections into the Afghan budget, taking into account the refusal of the Taliban to compromise on the creation of an inclusive government, protection of women's rights, including their right to work and education. Moreover, Washington has gone to use its favorite instrument of pressure in the form of financial sanctions and restrictions. In particular, \$9.5 billion of Afghanistan's foreign accounts were frozen, with \$7 billion in American bank accounts, which left the Taliban virtually without funds.

It is naturally that immediately after the formation of the transitional government, which does not meet Western criteria of inclusiveness, political scientists and economists began to talk about the threat of an economic collapse of Afghanistan in the form of a crisis of the banking system, the unwinding of inflationary spiral, problems with the financing of civil servants and the compression of GDP. These threats were expected to aggravate the already difficult situation with the provision of food and work for the most vulnerable segments of the population. The UN World Food Program estimates the number of Afghans currently facing "acute hunger" at 23 million people (that is, more than half of the almost 40 million population of Afghanistan) [4].

In order to prevent an uncontrolled humanitarian crisis and the flow of refugees, international organizations and institutions, neighboring countries and states with their own interests in Afghanistan have already begun to provide emergency humanitarian assistance since the autumn of 2021.

### Largest donors to Afghanistan

Funding for UN humanitarian response plan and flash appeal



Source: UNOCHA, February 2022

BBC

Taking into account Washington's leading role in the global financial and banking system, it was the American steps in the field of legal registration of money transfers and financing of humanitarian projects in Afghanistan that were important, and such steps were taken.

In the period from September 24 to December 10, 2021, the US Treasury Department issued several licenses. One of them, in particular, allowed limited export and re-export operations with the supply of food, medicines and medical equipment to Afghanistan [5]. Personal non-commercial money transfers to Afghanistan were also allowed, which allowed Western Union Co. and MoneyGram International Inc. to resume providing their services in this country [6]. All this has allowed international organizations to start implementing programs for providing targeted assistance to needy groups of the Afghan population.

However, the inflow of funds into the country did not yet mean solving the problems of the transitional government in the field of economic management, nor did it give grounds for softening the approaches of the United States and the West on the issue of official recognition of the Taliban's power. As the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Tom West stated on February 10, 2022 in an interview with the Afghan TV channel 1TV, the Taliban had not yet fulfilled the conditions for recognizing their government, therefore the US was not ready to resume the work of the embassy in Afghanistan, but would continue to interact with them in order to protect American interests [7].

In general, the American policy towards Afghanistan at the current stage can be described as simultaneously based on two approaches – providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people while limiting the access of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network to international financial resources.

This approach is clearly seen in the example of the Executive Order signed by President Joe Biden on February 11, 2022, according to which \$7 billion of the Central Bank of Afghanistan, frozen in the United States, will be transferred to a consolidated account at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. It is assumed that \$3.5 billion can be used to pay compensation to American citizens affected by terrorism (including the families of victims of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001), and the remaining funds will be used to provide humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people, while preventing the allocated funds from falling into the hands of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network [8].

In fact, we can say that the Americans have driven the Taliban into a certain trap. On the one hand, the Taliban has taken long-expected control of Afghanistan, which they see as their victory, but on the other hand, the Taliban does not have sufficient resources to even simply keep functioning the system of state administration. And they cannot get access to external resources due to the lack of recognition of the world community and, first of all, from the United States, although their emissaries take part in various international meetings.

A dead-end situation has developed, and it is still difficult for the Taliban to get out of it. All their calls to recognize the transitional government remain unanswered even by Muslim countries [9].

Pakistan, which is traditionally considered a regional player with the greatest influence on the Taliban, and one of the three countries that officially recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan during its existence in 1996–2001, refuses to recognize the transitional government today. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, in an interview with *Le Figaro*, declared expressly that the recognition of Taliban should be a “collective process” and Islamabad least of all wanted to be the only country that recognized the Taliban regime and received isolation in return, while his government is trying to change the economy of this country [10].

In this regard, the question arises whether it is possible in the near future for the Taliban to get out of the trap into which it has fallen.

### IS THERE THE WAY OUT OF THE TRAP?

It seems clear that in order to get out of the trap, the first thing the Taliban will need to do is to accept the demands of the world community to create a truly inclusive government, that is, to change the frame again. However, there is a conceptual problem here. According to the Taliban, an inclusive government implies the inclusion of several representatives of ethnic minorities in a government dominated by the Taliban. In principle, they have already given several posts to representatives of the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara communities, and on the basis of this they claim that they have fulfilled the requirements of the world community.

In turn, an inclusive government, as it is understood in international practice, is only one of the components in a larger environment of functioning inclusive political institutions that guarantee the competitive participation in the life of the country of various political forces standing on different ideological platforms and having their own points of view on political, economic and humanitarian issues. Inclusiveness also implies broad and independent participation of civil society and independent media in the sociopolitical life of the country.

With regard to Afghanistan, this means the participation in political and public life of not just ethnic minorities or women, but their political parties and associations, along with the Taliban, with a system of checks and balances (for example, in the form of an independent judicial system), as well as control by civil society and the media.

For the Taliban, such a type of political structure is hardly acceptable, as already indicated, based on the ideas of political dominance that has developed in the tradition and culture of Afghan politics. But, as history shows, sometimes even traditional development trajectories can change their direction.

Six months after the fall of Kabul, experts community formed four points of view regarding the likelihood of the Taliban changing their initial position on the formation of an inclusive government and reducing the degree of radicalization in their political thinking.

An example of *the first, or pessimistic, point of view* is the opinion of Syed Madadi, former Director of International Relations at the State Ministry of Peace of Afghanistan and a member of the technical secretariat of the peace negotiations in Afghanistan in Doha (Qatar), which he outlined in the article “The dangers of empowering the Taliban.”

Madadi does not believe in changing the Taliban’s thinking model, despite the efforts of the international community. “For many years, the world has been trying to soften the extremist ideology of the Taliban by exposing them to today’s world. As rebels, they learned diplomacy and negotiation tactics, but their medieval thinking remained just as conservative,” he writes.

The Afghan expert also does not believe in the possibility of the Taliban forming a truly inclusive government with a high share of participation of national minorities. In his opinion, it’s highly doubtful, since the inclusion of non-Pashtun ethnic minorities would “tarnish” the ethnic identity of the Taliban. “One of the reasons that the Taliban’s Islamist ambitions remain limited to Afghanistan is their deep fusion with the Pashtun identity and the desire to create a mono-ethnic power structure,” – he notes.

In addition, with authoritarian Islamic emirate form of government, the inclusion of other ethnic groups in the government would change little, since inclusive and representative governance makes sense only in a pluralistic and democratic system, where the legitimacy of the state and public policy depend on the approval of the people. Madadi points out that the Taliban transitional government already has one Uzbek and one Tajik, as well as two Hazaras, but this in no way affected the cessation of the systematic persecution of the Hazara Shiites. He also does not believe that the Taliban will ever allow women into the government, who are “the largest disenfranchised group in the country and who have put up the fiercest resistance to the regime.”

In this regard, Madadi recommends that the international community move away from the policy of appeasing the Taliban, because “the more the Taliban strengthen their power, the more inflexible they become before internal demands and external pressure” [11].

In addition to the above, theoretically, the Taliban’s fears about the dispersion of their movement’s forces, or even its disintegration into various parties, removal from power, as well as widespread interference by external forces through multiparty mechanisms, can serve as a deterrent to the transition to inclusive political institutions.

Currently, the Taliban movement is still a more or less consolidated force, despite the presence of several competing groups within it, concentrating around the Acting Minister of Defense of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Mullah Mohammad Yaqub (son of the founder of the Taliban, Mullah Omar), Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani. If we assume that the movement will go to the introduction of inclusive political institutions and enter them as one of the forces, then there may be a possibility that now competing groups within the Taliban may withdraw



from its membership and form their own parties and coalitions with other Afghan political forces.

The opinions of experts who adhere to *the second point of view* and profess *restrained optimism* about the ability of the Taliban to reduce their initial radicalism are summarized in the report “Afghanistan after Regime Change: Internal and International Uncertainty” prepared by MGIMO analysts. It highlights a number of rather positive moments after the establishment of the Taliban’s power.

First of all, it is noted that “during the first five months of being in power, the Taliban could not fully justify either the hopes of some or the fears of others,” and what is happening “on the ground” is contradictory. The authors emphasize that a certain order has been established in Kabul and in the country as a whole, since the Taliban were able to curb crime and general instability, and most ordinary Afghans get along with the social and living standards established by the new authorities.

MGIMO analysts also point out that the Taliban allowed female students to continue studying under existing programs at universities and complete their studies. The movement did not introduce total censorship, some print and

“AS REBELS, THEY LEARNED DIPLOMACY AND NEGOTIATION TACTICS, BUT THEIR MEDIEVAL THINKING REMAINED JUST AS CONSERVATIVE,” HE WRITES.

electronic media continued to work with them and there is access to the Internet.

As a fact of softening the political thinking of the Taliban, it is presented that they showed restraint in relation to rallies and demonstrations organized by civil activists in September 2021, despite the fact that many reports of a systemic punitive policy against a number of population groups turned out to be fake. The announcement of an amnesty for law enforcement officers who served the former Afghan government is also considered as an indicator of mitigation. The report states that “with a certain positive attitude, one can see the advantages in the fact that the Taliban movement and its government are not monolithic, there are disagreements and disputes, which in general can be considered a kind of system of controls and balances“ [12].

Of course, this point of view says nothing about the likelihood that the Taliban will go to form an inclusive government and transform the country on the basis of inclusive political and economic institutions. However, in general, it creates a rather positive picture and gives some reason to believe that the Taliban have the ability to political and ideological evolution.

**The third point of view** is based on the assumptions that the demands for creation of an inclusive government by the Taliban may eventually come to naught and lose their relevance due to the fatigue of the international community from the Afghan conflict and the growing desire to see Afghanistan stable regardless of who is in power there. The main thing is that this force controls Afghanistan and does not allow it to turn into a source of expansion of terrorism and radical Islamic ideology, and would ensure the safety of citizens, conducting business and education as normal. If all this is implemented, then over time the world community will recognize the legitimacy of the Taliban’s power and open access to donor funds and investments.

As proof of the world community’s fatigue from the Afghan conflict, supporters of this point of view consider the inability of ethnic minorities to form a front of resistance to the Taliban, as it was in the mid-1990s, when the Northern Alliance largely relied on external support. Attempts by Ahmad Masood Jr. and former Deputy Prime Minister Amrullah Saleh to organize resistance in the Panjshir Valley did not lead to anything, and the Taliban was able to establish its control over this seemingly impregnable natural citadel in a short time.

The already mentioned Afghan expert Syed Madadi also believes that the Taliban today are guided by the logic of waiting. “They expect that, in the end, the national security interests of the international community will prevail over its concern for humanitarian values; according to the Taliban, they will eventually give in and give them access to financial and political resources,“ he believes [11].

This point of view can only be opposed by the uncertainty with the departure of the United States from the requirements for the formation of an inclusive government. Afghanistan is not included in the sphere of American vital economic interests, and therefore Washington can keep it isolated for quite a long time, turning it into a problem forgotten by the Western media, as shown by the examples of Cuba or Libya.



And finally, *the fourth point of view*, which can be described as catastrophic, if the Taliban do not meet the world community halfway. It is based on the logic of the development of internal processes in such political movements seeking to establish extractive political and economic institutions in the country, and based on temporary compromises between several influential groups. In the conditions of the country's international isolation and acute shortage of resources, a struggle for power and control over the distribution of few resources may begin between groups.

As already noted, there are several such influential groups within the Taliban, and according to this point of view, it can be expected that sooner or later an internal conflict in the movement may flare up while maintaining the external financial and investment isolation of the regime. The fact is that behind every influential leader within the Taliban there are military-political groups or Pashtun clans that constantly demand various material dividends, considering their leader as a tool for gaining access to resources.

This is, in principle, an old Afghan problem that fits into the larger problem of confrontation between state institutions, on the one hand, and traditionalist and religious institutions focused on supporting forms of group solidarity (family, clan, tribe, Muslim community), on the other. The history of Afghanistan, in fact, is a confrontation between these two types of institutions.

The situation was more or less stable with respect for informal institutions by the central government and their application not only in the tribal area, but also within the state system of resource allocation. However, as soon as the central government tried to impose the priority of state institutions over traditionalist and religious ones, Afghanistan immediately began to slide into instability. There are many examples of this, ranging from the modernist reforms of Amanullah Khan (1892–1960) and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (1978–1992) and ending with the presidency of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani (2001–2021).



Afghanistan winter 2020 in Herat

**The fact is that behind every influential leader within the Taliban there are military-political groups or Pashtun clans that constantly demand various material dividends, considering their leader as a tool for gaining access to resources.**

The current situation in Afghanistan is interesting because the status of state institutions has passed to religious institutions based on Sharia. Religious institutions here are opposed to traditionalist institutions based on the Pashtun code of “Pushtunwali,” tribal and ethnic principles of social solidarity.

There is support of family and tribe behind the Pashtun, who follows traditional institutions. And for those who give priority to state institutions, only his colleagues or ideological fellow travelers, who are to varying degrees disconnected from their roots and often have to rely on the support of external forces in their politics.

The young Afghans of the beginning of the XX century and the Marxist-Leninists from the PDPA can be considered an example of such groups torn from their roots. When defeated, representatives of such groups are forced to either emigrate or return to their roots. For example, as did many members of the PDPA from the Parcham faction, which was dominated by representatives of national minorities, who went over to Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Pashtuns from the Hulk faction who joined the Taliban movement.

Also, the so-called “new Afghans”, a group of politicians who were supposed to become the mainstay of Ashraf Ghani’s power, fall into this category of Afghans torn from their roots. According to Andrey Serenko, a leading expert at the Center for the Study of Modern Afghanistan (CSMA), the “new Afghans” were young politicians and security forces aged 30 to 50 years. He cites the following definition given to this group by Afghan experts: “The new generation of politicians is characterized by Afghan patriotism, Afghan nationalism, the desire to think in national categories, and not primitive ethnic tribal schemes. Yes, they understand the value of tradition and cherish it, but for them, first of all, the united Afghan state has value.”

The group of “new Afghans” consisted of the head of the National Security Council Hamidullah Mohib (35 years old), Interior Minister and then Deputy Prime Minister Amrullah Saleh (Tajik, 47 years old), Defense Minister Asadullah Khalid (Pashtun, 49 years old), Police Colonel General Khushal Sadat, head of the National Security Department Masoud Andarabi, and others [13].

Now the Taliban leaders may face the same problem, who will need to make a choice: either follow the Islamic ideology as the source of state institutions, or not break away from the roots and remain faithful to the traditional institutions of the

Pashtun tribes (first of all, the Gilzai, to which many influential Taliban belong), as well as Pashtun nationalism.

The continuation of international isolation and the acute shortage of financial resources for the development of the country may give rise to another problem – the ability of the Taliban to follow the social contract that they offered to Afghan society in exchange for power. Its parameters are: security, anti-corruption and economic development. The fact that the Taliban regained power relatively easily in August 2021 in almost all provinces can be explained by the willingness of most of society (except for modernized and urbanized Afghans) to conclude a social contract with them.

To date, the Taliban have fulfilled two parameters of the social agreement – they have ensured security in the country and have begun the fight against corruption. However, the third parameter – “economic development“ remains unimplemented. The Taliban are trying to fulfill it, urging foreign investors to invest in mineral deposits and create jobs, as well as speaking about their readiness to participate in the construction projects of the TAPI gas pipeline and the Mazar – I – Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar railway. Nevertheless, so far all this remains only at the level of declarations. Without international recognition, large investments will not come, and in order to obtain it, it will be necessary to fulfill the requirements of the world community, one of which is the creation of a truly inclusive government.

It is in the “economic development“ parameter of the social contract that there is a window of opportunity for opponents of the current Taliban leadership who can offer their social contract to the population. The range of potential applicants is quite wide, ranging from groups within the Taliban (which may eventually be ready to rebrand the movement), temporarily gone into the shadows, in opposition to the Taliban and representing national minorities and modernist pro-Western counter-elites, and ending with terrorist organizations such as ISIS-Khorasan. So far, international humanitarian aid helps Taliban, which is delaying the problems of a significant part of the needy population. But what happens if it shrinks? And this is a crucial issue for the Taliban movement.

## CONCLUSIONS

Summing up the above, I would like to note that the problem of creating an inclusive government remains one of the system-forming factors in stabilizing situation in Afghanistan and putting it on a development trajectory. The disagreement between the Taliban, on the one hand, and the world community led by the United States, on the other, in their views on understanding the phenomenon of “inclusive government“ and the principles of its materialization still seem insurmountable, which serves as a potential source of Afghanistan's entry into a new round of instability due to the lack that transitional government is lacking solid economic base and permanent sources of income.

The use of power tools to maintain their power and extract financial resources from internal sources can be effective for the Taliban. But it will not

TO DATE, THE TALIBAN HAVE FULFILLED TWO PARAMETERS OF THE SOCIAL AGREEMENT– THEY HAVE ENSURED SECURITY IN THE COUNTRY AND HAVE BEGUN THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION.



last long, because sooner or later, given the continuing lack of resources, with the deterioration of economic and humanitarian conditions, crisis processes in a number of areas will increasingly affect both society and structures of the Taliban itself.

In this regard, the issues of breaking out of isolation and gaining international recognition, followed by investments (for example, in the mining industry), will eventually become more and more relevant for the survival of Taliban. At the same time, it should be noted that possible attempts of psychological pressure on the world community in exchange for recognition will play against the Taliban themselves, since they may worsen their international image, which they have been trying to improve recently.

Thus, the Taliban today faces a choice: either choose a strategy of waiting for everything to work out by itself over time and the world will recognize the legitimacy of their power, or decide to adopt international rules of the game and form some kind of inclusive political institutions, while being aware that this will increase the risks for consolidation within the movement itself. In fact, this is a fateful decision, on which both the future of the Taliban and the future of Afghanistan in the system of regional international political and economic relations will largely depend.

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# TAJIKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN:

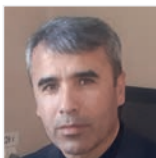
## RELATIONS BEFORE AND AFTER THE TALIBAN CAME TO POWER



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### **ABSTRACT**

The article is devoted to Tajikistan's policy towards Afghanistan in modern conditions. This article describes the understanding of the situation in Afghanistan in the public discourse of Tajikistan, the peculiarities of the policy of the official Dushanbe in relation to its southern neighbor. The experience of receiving Afghan refugees in Tajikistan is considered. The “red lines” in Tajikistan's foreign policy strategy towards Afghanistan are defined and an assessment of the mutual priorities of both countries in modern conditions is given. The final conclusions are presented based on the current agenda in Central Asia.

### **KEYWORDS**

Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, foreign policy, security, Taliban, humanitarian catastrophe.

## INTRODUCTION

The topic of Tajik-Afghan relations is the subject of scrupulous research by Tajik scientists, experts and diplomats. In recent years, due to the transformation of the situation in Afghanistan, many books and expert articles have been published. The versatility of Afghanistan's problems attracts the attention of Tajik researchers, and there is a significant number of papers in this area. As to subject of our research, it is worth mentioning papers of K. Iskandarova [1; 2; 3 and 4], J. Latifova [5], T. N. Nazarova [6], A. Sattorzoda [7], H. Zarifi [8], S. M. Aslova [9], A. Rakhnamo [10], F. B. Umarova [11], S. M. Vorisova [12] et al. The papers of these authors consider various aspects of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, security problems, the degree of challenges and threats to the Central Asia countries, including Tajikistan, etc. Before and after the events of August 15, 2021, a number of expert papers were published that cover various aspects of possible and potential interaction between Tajikistan and the current rulers of Afghanistan.

Research method. The article uses comparative historical and retrospective research methods, modeling and systematization of real and potential threats and challenges, content analysis and situational analysis, which together are based on the analysis of foreign policy in conditions of uncertainty and rapid changes in the geopolitical situation.

## ON CURRENT SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN: THE POINT OF VIEW OF DUSHANBE

For Tajikistan's foreign policy, the turn of events in Afghanistan in 2021 was a great shock and challenge. The offensive spring-summer campaign of the Taliban (contrary to certain points of the peace treaty signed in Doha between the United States and the Taliban [see: 13; 14 and 15]) and subsequently the forceful seizure of the supreme power of Kabul; or the "gift/transfer" of power in Afghanistan by interested powers to the Taliban and the role of Ashraf Ghani and his closest associate, National Security Adviser Hamdullah Muhib, has significantly changed the understanding, form and approaches to ensuring security in neighboring countries and regions. The current situation in the post-Soviet territory related to the events in Ukraine and the possibility of a bloody civil war in Afghanistan are increasingly actualizing the need to strengthen its own potential in all areas to ensure Tajikistan's national security.

Dushanbe has been preparing for the current development of events in Afghanistan for a long time. President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon has repeatedly stressed that "we need to be prepared for all scenarios of development of the situation" [16, p. 96].

The official Dushanbe has started taking serious measures since 2020. Thus, against the background of the activation of the Taliban and its affiliated terrorist organizations, in which militants of Central Asian origin from the northern provinces of Afghanistan are represented, a meeting of the Security Council of the Republic of Tajikistan was held in Dushanbe in June 2020 [17]. The main topic

of discussion was the aggravation of the situation on the border with Afghanistan. Then, along with other measures, the President of Tajikistan instructed the Government of the country to prevent terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking. Special attention was paid to strengthening the defense, strengthening the protection of the state border, increasing the readiness of military units, etc.

Today it is obvious that the Taliban factor will continue to influence the policy and actions of Dushanbe in the system of relations with foreign partners. The fact that Dushanbe does not recognize the Taliban movement and its power in Kabul is primarily based on its own experience of the civil war, in which “political” Islam was one of the parties to the conflict. Therefore, the factors of the ambiguity of the situation in Afghanistan, the crisis of the legitimacy of the Taliban – both external and internal – the experience of the failed and conflict-forming policy pursued during the eight months of the Taliban’s stay in power, and the aggravation of the general sociopolitical situation, and the possible start of local hostilities with the onset of spring 2022 from the political opponents – will increasingly influence Tajikistan’s foreign policy initiatives.

The overall military-political situation in Afghanistan may deteriorate greatly due to external and internal factors. Another round of geopolitical struggle in this country can be attributed to the external factor, which makes Afghanistan a place of clash of interests and strategies of major global and regional powers. Perhaps we will witness the indirect influence of the situation around Ukraine on the Afghan agenda, where the involved and opposing sides will begin to compete with each other. Already today, there are opinions that, since the crisis around Ukraine will be long-term, the attention of major powers to the problems of Afghanistan will noticeably weaken. In reality, the factor of geopolitical confrontation in the world contributed to the fact that Russia and China, after the Third meeting of the foreign ministers of Afghanistan’s neighboring countries at the end of March 2022 in Tongxi, China, accredited and recognized the leadership of the Afghan embassies to Taliban diplomats in Moscow and Beijing. We have witnessed the “positive” impact of the crisis in Ukraine for the Taliban. The internal political crisis in Pakistan, with the possible resignation of Prime Minister Imran Khan, makes the overall situation uncertain both for the Taliban and around Afghanistan. In general, this precedent opens up an opportunity for the regional powers involved to influence the ongoing processes in Afghanistan, and then it is impossible to guess how events will develop further.

The internal factor is a whole bunch of problems (without taking into account the current acute socio-economic crisis) for the Taliban.

Continued armed struggle against the Taliban forces by the fighters of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (hereinafter – NRFA). In social networks, materials about the NRFA’s combat operations against Taliban militants are published daily, as a result of which the latter are killed, injured and captured [18].

The expected conflict within the Taliban involves the key clans that want to strengthen their influence on the government. In September 2021, the media reported on internal tensions between various Taliban groups. So, in January



2022, protest rallies were held in the city of Maimana, the administrative center of Faryab province, caused by the arrests of local authorities [19]. The Taliban did not resolve this situation, preferring to preserve the conflict, while similar incidents can occur in any other province. It can be assumed that local leaders can declare themselves free from the current power of Kabul, just as it was in July – August 2021, when local influential people handed over the centers of the Afghan provinces to the Taliban.

The emergence and activation of organizations and movements with Salafist and Tahrir ideology, with various names and sponsors, which in the near future will influence the general situation of this country. The Taliban managed to officially subdue Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Salafi groups (they gave Bayat to the Taliban), in fact there were great ideological differences between them, and these organizations, no matter how much their leaders wanted, were not represented in the authorities.

The factor of the Islamic State (IS) movement in Taliban Afghanistan – today they are increasing their presence in certain provinces of Afghanistan and, perhaps, in the spring of 2022, they will begin hostilities and show their real potential.

Various civic organizations and movements (especially women's and youth) that have enjoyed the taste of freedom and democracy over the twenty years of the republic. Today, they create problem for the Government of Afghanistan, formed from among the supporters of the Taliban.

The growing number of armed anti-Taliban groups in Afghanistan is steadily increasing. Today, such new groups as the Supreme Council of the National Resistance of Afghanistan, the Front for Freedom of Afghanistan, the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan, and others have already announced their existence [see: 20 and 21]. In the conditions of the complete usurpation of power by the Taliban, they began an armed struggle against it.

Taking into account all of the above, there is a high probability that due to the presence of a favorable environment – fragile stability and security, similar extremist ideologies of the Taliban and other movements and groups, external interested countries, intensification of international organized crime (especially in the production and sale of drug substances, precious metals and stones) – territory of Afghanistan will be used to increase terrorist activity, which poses a particular danger to the countries of the Central Asian region (CAR). The Taliban has recently banned the cultivation of poppies and production of all types of narcotic drugs in Afghanistan. Probably, the Taliban pursues two goals: their measure has already led to an increase in the prices of narcotic drugs on world markets, and they will take full control of the entire process of drug production and export.

It is obvious that with such a development of events, the CAR will face both the export of radical ideology and enrollment of unstable and radicalized citizens, as well as high level of drug trafficking through the so-called “Northern Route.” The experience of studying the issue shows that if CAR does not pay close attention to the problems (corruption, unemployment, meeting minimal social needs, the

factor of trust in the political system and recognition of political legitimacy), the scenario worse than the terrorist actions of the IG in 2013–2016 is possible, which will lead to the infusion of a part of the civilian population of the region into extremist groups, located in Afghanistan.

### THE “AFGHAN FACTOR” IN THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE OF TAJIKISTAN

An analysis of the information space and social networks shows that in Tajikistan, since the summer of 2021, broad segments of the population have begun to pay close attention to the events in Afghanistan. Traditionally, the Afghan agenda has always been present in the media space of Tajikistan, but it was discussed only in the circle of research experts and creative community (poets, writers, journalists). The events of the summer of 2021 in Afghanistan attracted the attention of broad social groups, since the Taliban factor began to be perceived as an anti-Tajik phenomenon, threatening, first of all, the Persian-speaking population of Afghanistan.

Stable stereotypes began to collapse in the mass consciousness that on the other side of the Panj/Amu Darya River (the understanding that the same people live on both sides of the river has strengthened in Tajik discourse), not Afghans, but Tajiks live. Tajik society began to write more and discuss this topic through the prism of the fact that relatives are in great danger, there were calls for national solidarity. A steady public demand has formed for the support of Tajiks on the other side of the Panj/Amu Darya. Users of social networks published posts every minute about the change in the military-political situation in Afghanistan, did not sleep at night, shared news from this country with each other.

In the media of Tajikistan, the key person personifying the spirit of resistance to the “Taliban Middle Ages” is Ahmad Masud, the leader of the NFRA, the son of the legendary commander, the national hero of Afghanistan Ahmadshah Masud. His personality, intellectual abilities, and political views attracted the attention of the citizens of Tajikistan. Meanwhile, before the events of August – September 2021, many in Tajikistan did not know anything about Ahmad Masud at all.

Another significant phenomenon that has manifested in the public life of Tajikistan after the events of August 2021, there is an increase in the number of subscribers from among Tajik users on the accounts and pages of public and political figures of Afghanistan in social networks and YouTube channels. The war in Panjshir and the regions bordering it has greatly increased the interest of Tajik citizens in the events of this country. The seizure of the main road and administrative centers of Panjshir province on September 5, 2021 by the Taliban forces with the support of their foreign patrons [see: 22 and 23] was perceived by the Tajiks as a national tragedy.

This distinguishes Tajikistan from other Central Asian states and is due to a number of reasons. *Firstly*, Afghanistan and Tajikistan are historically close and related countries that it is impossible to separate them. Tajiks make up 46% of the population of Afghanistan [24]. Both countries have a common culture

and history. In both countries, most of the population speaks Farsi. Farsi is the language of interethnic communication for the peoples of Tajikistan and the ethnic groups of Afghanistan – for all Hazaras, Farsi is also the native language [25]. Namely, the Hazaras of Afghanistan are in conflict on the basis of ethnicity, language and denomination with the ethnocentric Pashtun “Taliban.”

In general, the Tajiks of Afghanistan are an autochthonous population, a politically and economically active group. Before the Taliban seized power, they were represented in all spheres of life in this country, and formed a significant part of the national, military, administrative, intellectual and creative elite.

**Secondly**, inter-social relations have been restored during the years of independence of Tajikistan. Unlike other peoples of Central Asia, Tajiks understand many natives of Afghanistan without translation. Many citizens of Tajikistan have watched and are watching TV channels of Afghanistan (the key media of this country have created and are creating content in Persian) and are involved in the social media space of this country. There is a close connection between the creative and intellectual elite of both countries.

**Thirdly**, the Tajik’s society interest in the events in Afghanistan has no conjunctural specifics, that is, it does not appear during crisis situations, on the contrary, everything that happens in this country is constantly covered by national media and discussed in the space of the Tajik segment of social networks. In general, the situation in Afghanistan is an object of constant attention of state and public figures, intellectuals, experts and the general population.

The events in Afghanistan in August – September 2021 also revealed a group (very small, but therefore no less dangerous) of users of social networks of Tajik origin who openly supported the Taliban and the actions of this movement. This was especially clearly expressed in the stated thesis “The Taliban liberated Afghanistan from the foreign presence and defeated the United States.” There were frequent and very sharp discussions with these users, and they could not give any other arguments to prove their case, except for authentic radical views with the Taliban and similar groups. It is obvious that the experience and ideology of the Taliban will create a number of difficulties and real challenges for the Central Asian countries in the medium term.

### SPECIFICS OF TAJIKISTAN'S POLICY TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN

The current Concept of Tajikistan’s Foreign Policy states that the official Dushanbe “is a supporter of accelerated restoration of lasting peace in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and believes that the tranquility, security and political stability of this neighboring country meets its national interests“ [26]. It is further emphasized that mutually beneficial cooperation with Afghanistan is based “on the historical, linguistic and cultural communities of the two nations“ [26]. Such a formulation does not apply to other countries in expectations from cooperation and the definition of national interests of Tajikistan.

The change in the situation in Afghanistan has actualized the issue of adopting

a new version of the Foreign Policy Concept. It is obvious that the new Concept will preserve and even expand the Afghanistan vector as a foreign policy priority since today it is of particular importance in ensuring the national security of Tajikistan, including taking into account the January events in Kazakhstan, and in general for regional security and stability in Central Asia.

Tajikistan's position on the Taliban remains consistent and has not changed since 1996. Tajikistan has never recognized their authority, and our political leadership has repeatedly taken initiatives that a terrorist organization that has turned the population of Afghanistan into a victim of circumstances can create serious threats and potential challenges for the entire international community. In the late 90s of the last century, Emomali Rahmon proposed to form a security belt around the borders of Afghanistan in order to coordinate joint measures to combat terrorism. After the well-known events of September 2001 in New York, a global anti-terrorist campaign was launched in Afghanistan. So far, Tajikistan's proposal on the need to form a Security Belt around Afghanistan is relevant, and in January 2022, during an extraordinary CSTO summit, the President of Tajikistan once again pointed out the need to minimize potential and real threats emanating from Taliban Afghanistan.

Revealing the specifics of Tajikistan's policy towards Afghanistan, taking into account the current situation, it is important to note the following.

**Firstly**, despite all the events and circumstances, Tajikistan has consistently supported the central legitimate government of Afghanistan since the establishment of diplomatic relations, which distinguishes the experience of Dushanbe from all other neighbors of Kabul.

**Secondly**, Tajikistan is today the only neighbor of Afghanistan that has not held official negotiations with the Taliban and has not invited them to the country (except for prolongation of the agreement for purchase of electricity with representatives of Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS) in Tashkent in December 2021 [27]), and consistently for more than 25 years, Tajikistan adhered to the its strategy, including during the first rule of the Taliban (1996–2001), on cooperation only with the central and legitimate government.

**Thirdly**, Tajikistan, since August 2021 to this day, has made a lot of efforts to attract the attention of international leaders and the public to the large-scale humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

After the well-known events on August 15, telephone talks were held in Kabul between the President of Tajikistan and Presidents of Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, during which the new military-political situation in Afghanistan and its impact on Central Asia were discussed.

The approach to understanding the Afghan crisis and Dushanbe's expectations from the new Kabul authorities was expressed by the President of Tajikistan on August 25, 2021 during a meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan Quraishi [24]. It was noted that in order to urgently solve problems in the field of politics and security, it is necessary to create an inclusive government in Afghanistan as soon as possible with the participation of representatives of all

ethnic groups, primarily Tajiks, who make up about 46% of the population of Afghanistan (it is noteworthy that Russian President Vladimir Putin, during his participation in the plenary session of the Valdai IDC stated this figure), and Dushanbe will not recognize the government, which will be formed only by the Taliban. These statements of the President of Tajikistan then and today significantly distinguish the policy of Dushanbe from other countries in the region, which are ready to establish bilateral relations and expand contacts with the Taliban Government in Afghanistan.

In September 2021, during the SCO and CSTO summits in Dushanbe, the Afghan agenda was one of the key topics. For the first time, a joint meeting of the SCO and the CSTO was held to discuss the situation in Afghanistan. At the end of September, Emomali Rahmon visited Brussels and Paris, where he met with senior EU officials and President Emmanuel Macron, and one of the key topics was also the Afghan problem.

For Tajikistan, from the first days of independence in cooperation with Afghanistan, the ethnic factor has not been the prevailing moment. Dushanbe has consistently expanded its relations with the legitimate central Government of Afghanistan in its policy. Statements by the political leadership of Tajikistan on the situation in Afghanistan are aimed at ensuring the interests of all ethnic groups of multinational Afghanistan. Tajikistan's position is explained by the fact that in such a situation, the ethnic groups of Afghanistan will be infringed, and the authorities will carry out repressions against them. In this situation, the humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan will be even bigger.

As for the Taliban, it is essentially a Pashtun-centric movement, other peoples are represented in the ranks of their leadership as exotic figures and do not have the ability to exert any significant influence on the domestic and foreign policy of Afghanistan. Tajik Taliban (meaning citizens of Afghanistan) to a more extent represent in government of the northern, central and western provinces of Afghanistan. At the moment, Kori Dinmuhammad Hanif heads the Ministry of Economy, Kori Fasehuddin is the commander of the headquarters of the Taliban army [28] and Mavlavi Amanuddin Mansour has been appointed commander-in-chief of the Taliban Air Force [29]. It is noteworthy that they all come from the province of Badakhshan. Haji Nuriddin Azizi heads the Ministry of Trade of the Taliban (native of Panjshir) [30]. All of the above persons initially collaborated with the Taliban. For example, Kori Dinmuhammad Hanif had a ministerial portfolio during their first ruling in 1996–2001. Nevertheless, the degree of influence of the non-Pashtun elite in determining the policy of the entire movement is very limited, and all of these politicians – ethnic Tajiks – owe their position to the former and current leaders of the Taliban and are used as a tool for implementing the current policy of the Kabul authorities.

Thus, Tajikistan recognizes the power that will be formed with the participation of all citizens of Afghanistan at their will and without the current dominance of the Taliban. This position was once again expressed during a press conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan on February 2, 2022, where the Minister

of Foreign Affairs of the Tajikistan Sirodjiddin Mukhriddin noted that Dushanbe does not recognize the power of the Taliban and will consistently demand the formation of a real inclusive government that respect for the rights and freedoms of all citizens, which the entire world community stands for.

Tajikistan's concern over the events in Afghanistan and the non-recognition of the Taliban's authority is caused by the following factors.

**Firstly**, during the entire period of independence, the Central Asian Countries at the bilateral and multilateral levels have designated countering international terrorism as a factor in ensuring regional security. Against the background of the January events in Kazakhstan, the issue of countering extremism and terrorism is of crucial importance. Thus, Emomali Rahmon, in his speech in honor of the anniversary of the formation of the Armed Forces of Tajikistan, noted: "The horrific terrorist acts taking place in peaceful countries show that any country, regardless of its level of development and potential, can become vulnerable in a short time under the pressure of terrorist and extremist organizations" [31]. Thus, Tajikistan's concerns about policy of the Taliban movement derive not only from the country perspective but also from regional perspective.

**Secondly**, the practice of the Taliban, that is, the forceful seizure of power and the formation of an Islamic emirate, can activate marginally minded elements who want to repeat this in their countries, including Central Asia countries. The precedent of the Taliban significantly changes the security system in the CAR, as potential challenges and threats can become the real one.

**Thirdly**, Tajikistan has the second longest border with Afghanistan (after Pakistan), and today the northern provinces of this country are completely controlled by the Taliban. Foreign fighters, including those of Central Asian origin (IMU, Jamaat Ansorulloh, etc.), have great influence in these regions and act on behalf of the Taliban. Recent experience has shown that militants primarily threaten their countries (for example, the leaders of the IMU and Ansorulloh, after signing the peace agreement in Doha, congratulated the Taliban on the "victory" over the United States and its allies. Along with this, they threatened the authorities of their countries to "repeat the success of the Taliban in the near future") [32]. It is an axiom that foreign fighters in Afghanistan are protected by the Taliban. We cannot believe the statements of the Taliban that the territory they control will not be used against other countries. Their actions show the opposite, since foreign fighters, including those from Central Asia, were used in offensive campaigns. Today, the Taliban issues them passports of Afghan citizens, supports them in every possible way, and almost all foreign fighters are under their care [33], so that their potential and combat experience can be used at any time.

Tajikistan is ready for any turn of events in Afghanistan. For twenty years, a number of measures have been implemented in our country to strengthen the borders in the southern direction. For many years, Tajikistan's border guards have been suppressing illegal border violations, but after 2009, with the appearance of foreign fighters in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, the situation began to change, and Tajikistan pays great attention to this issue. Today, the physical

penetration of foreign fighters can be assessed as unlikely, because:

- They are all, like the Taliban as a whole, externally dependent, that is, supported by regional players and without their appropriate permission are unlikely to dare to take such a step.

- The small number of militants, especially since many of them have got families.

- Their ideas and religious beliefs, as well as religious practices, are unpopular with broad groups of the population, since Tajik citizens are already accustomed to living in a secular system and in a free society.

- The armed forces of Tajikistan have sufficient potential to repel threats from the southern direction.

Despite the above, the possibility of spreading the ideology of terrorist groups and the risk of recruiting citizens of the region remain consistently high. Against this background, the position of the official Dushanbe is based on a real understanding of the situation and assessment of existing challenges and threats, as well as a clear interpretation of Tajikistan's national interests and priorities in the field of security.

Despite the policy of non-recognition of the Taliban, Tajikistan supports the efforts of the international community to provide and increase the volume of humanitarian assistance to the population of Afghanistan. The political leadership of Tajikistan has repeatedly stated its readiness to assist in provision of assistance through its territory and to use the possibilities of six bridges across the Panj/Amu Darya River.

## AFGHAN REFUGEES IN TAJIKISTAN

The analysis of media shows that Tajikistan has a unique experience in receiving refugees from Afghanistan in the Central Asian region. The official Dushanbe is the first country in the region to sign and ratify the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Refugees and an absolute record holder for the reception of refugees from Afghanistan [34]. An analysis of media shows that in Tajikistan the term “refugee” is more identified only with people from Afghanistan, since over the past twenty years they have accounted for more than 98% of refugees entering the country. An analysis of available media materials showed that refugees from Afghanistan in Tajikistan in 2006 amounted to about 1.5 thousand people [35], in other years their number did not exceed 4 thousand people, and in October 2021 there were more than 15 thousand people [36].

Tajikistan's refugee policy has received positive assessments from both UN representatives and independent research experts from Afghanistan. The former head of the UNHCR office in Tajikistan, Ilya Todorovich, noted in June 2008: “Tajikistan is one of the most advanced countries that has successfully solved the problem of its refugees” [37]. The Afghan expert on international relations Takvullah Takvo in his article notes that his compatriots live and work in Tajikistan and have the same rights and benefits to receive education in the country's institutions on an equal basis with Tajik citizens [37].

The experience of accepting refugees from Afghanistan shows that Tajikistan has always provided assistance and support based on its available capabilities in difficult times for the residents of this country. Many Afghan refugees used the territory of Tajikistan as a transit for moving to other countries, mainly to Canada. This aspect of humane treatment of Afghan citizens who are forced to leave their country actualizes the approach to Tajikistan's policy of respecting the rights and freedoms of all citizens regardless of their ethnic and religious origin.

### **"RED LINES" IN TAJIKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY**

Afghanistan has been in a deep internal crisis for more than forty years, and during this period it became the object of interventions by two major powers. These and many other factors contributed to the formation of stable "red lines" among neighboring and other regional and global powers. Official Dushanbe builds and implements its policy towards Afghanistan based on national interests and security priorities. Tajik political scientist A. Rakhnamo in his book "Afghanistan and Central Asia: Specifics and Prospects of Mutual Influence," published in 2015 in Tajik, identified seven "red lines" for Tajikistan's foreign policy.

1. The clash of interests of the West and Russia.
2. Competition between India and Pakistan.
3. The contradiction between the United States and Iran.
4. Political tensions between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.
5. The complexity of interethnic relations in Afghanistan.
6. The problem of attitudes to extremism.
7. Sensitivity between two understandings of the dogmas of religion [10, pp. 164–180].

Over time and with the changing situation in Central Asia (the fall of the Ghani government and the second return of the Taliban to the political Olympus of Kabul), some "red lines" for Tajikistan's foreign policy have transformed, others have lost their relevance and today require a different interpretation.

**1. The clash of interests of Russia, China and the West.** Taking into account the turbulence of the situation in Central Asia, which we have been observing since the October 2020 events in Kyrgyzstan and the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan, Russia's influence has increased in the region. Against the background of these events, Moscow was able to significantly strengthen its military and political position in Central Asia. Today it is difficult to predict how the crisis in Ukraine will affect Russia's policy in the Central Asian region. The Central Asian countries adhere to a policy of neutrality towards the parties to the conflict, will not support Western sanctions against Russia, but will comply with the restrictions imposed. The probability of full-fledged support of one of the parties to the conflict is also considered unlikely. The motive of all countries is based on the fact that they cannot risk their well-being and limit their own foreign policy. China is increasingly strengthening its influence on the economic and investment component in the CAR, and we are seeing a complementarity of



measures between Moscow and Beijing. The Ukrainian crisis provides China with great opportunities to increase its influence (including in the field of military-political cooperation) in Central Asia. The United States remains one of the important players in Central Asia, although the region has noticeably distanced itself from the priorities of this country. Under the conditions of the previously announced withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in September 2021, a turning point occurred in this country, and in August the Taliban seized power. In the information space, this fact was interpreted as a “defeat” of the United States in Afghanistan, but despite this, the Americans retain their influence in this country. It is obvious that after the signing of the Doha peace agreement, the United States deliberately created conditions for the transfer of power to the Taliban. The uncertainty of the development of the situation in Afghanistan with the onset of the spring-summer period of 2022 complicates the military-political situation, as the key players in the Afghan political field have changed roles.

If these three countries start competing in Afghanistan (we are already seeing the prerequisites for this today) or are completely preoccupied with the crisis in Ukraine, then Tajikistan, with its principled position on the Taliban, will face threats and challenges of a completely different nature (in both scenarios – different specifics). Beijing is determined to expand its economic presence in Afghanistan and is focused on the development of minerals. Moscow is most concerned about security issues and the opportunity to rehabilitate its Soviet past in this country with strengthening cooperation with the Taliban. The United States, while retaining significant leverage over Kabul (including the factor of frozen assets in the amount of \$10 billion), can use the situation to create an unstable territory near the borders of China and the zone of interests of Russia, which will increasingly involve these countries in a long-term controlled conflict. The possible competition and clash of interests of these countries will make the Afghan crisis insoluble and will remain problematic for the whole of Central Asia, including Tajikistan, for an indefinite long time.

**2. The Taliban factor for Tajikistan.** Today it is obvious that Dushanbe can no longer ignore the Taliban, which has repeatedly made statements and calls for normalization of relations with its northern neighbor. For Tajikistan, there are several lines (unfortunately, diagonally opposite in nature) that dictate a mutually exclusive choice.

**3. First,** economic interests. Tajikistan, in its National Development Strategy, has identified a way out of the transport and communication impasse, turning the country into a transit zone, ensuring energy independence and turning the country into an exporter of electricity. In both directions, the southern vector plays a key role, since the shortest sea route to the shores of warm seas passes through the territory of Afghanistan to the ports of Gwadar (Pakistan) or Chobahor (Iran); the potential of the Wakhan corridor to connect Tajikistan with Pakistan is relevant and high. This corridor during the administration of Karzai and Ghani was in the zone of contradictions between Kabul and Islamabad. For example, Karzai noted that his government would agree to the use of the Afghan isthmus

only when Pakistan stops interfering in the internal affairs of his country. And finally, the completion and operation of the CASA-1000 transmission line, which connects the power systems of Central and South Asia, is impossible without the assistance of the current Afghan authorities. If the Taliban establishes itself in Kabul, and they have come for a long time, then what about these strategic goals?

**4. *Secondly***, public opinion. As noted above, since June 2021, the interest of Tajik citizens in the events taking place in Afghanistan has significantly increased. The Taliban movement is generally perceived in the public opinion of Tajikistan as an “anti-Tajik” movement, through whose fault the Tajiks of Afghanistan suffered irreparable and irretrievable losses – the murder of Ahmadshah Masud, Professor Burkhoniddin Rabbani and other representatives of the military, political, intellectual and creative elite, which lasted from the 90s of the twentieth century to the present time.

**5. *Thirdly***, there is a vital interest in building good-neighborly relations with Afghanistan. Since its independence, Tajikistan has repeatedly stated the importance of strengthening close relations with Afghanistan, since they share a common history, culture and civilization with this country. Taking into account the Taliban factor, this vector may remain unrealized and/or transform into a threat-forming one.

**6. Security factor: countering extremism and terrorism.**

**7.** The phenomenon of ISIS in 2013–2016 significantly complicated the fight against extremism and terrorism in Central Asia as a whole. Tajikistan’s modern experience in countering extremism and terrorism began to take shape in 2014 [38], but the degree of threats and challenges remains relevant. Against this background, the seizure of power by the Taliban, a terrorist organization on the UN sanctions lists and banned in many countries, requires urgent measures. We can safely assume that new problems will appear in the security sector in the short term (unfortunately, there are no refuting facts). First of all, this will be due to the penetration of radical ideas from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries. It should be emphasized that the IMU, Ansorulloh, and immigrants from other CIS countries, with the conciliatory position of the Taliban, can strengthen the recruitment of CAR citizens and their compatriots (according to media reports, this is already happening, and “soft” propaganda is also observed in social networks). If the Taliban consolidate its power in Afghanistan, this country will turn into a center of attraction for radical residents from other countries, and threats to the Central Asian countries will increase. Therefore, the countries of the region, including key players, need to be prepared for any scenario of development of events in Afghanistan. The potential of outgoing challenges and threats should not be reduced or underestimated. In general, the factor of ensuring security and reducing real terrorist threats from this country will significantly affect the nature and content of Tajikistan’s relations with its southern neighbor.

## ASSESSMENT OF MUTUAL PRIORITIES OF TAJIKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN IN MODERN CONDITIONS

Considering the above, Tajikistan's priorities and expectations regarding the situation in Afghanistan are outlined, which are undoubtedly explained by the constant interests of the country. The following can be identified as the key priorities of Tajikistan.

**Firstly**, a stable and secure country (minimizing all existing threats today). **Secondly**, non-ideologized government. The Taliban, in fact, is reviving religious ideology as a state ideology. World experience shows that such governments will always strive to support similar groups, which can lead to a surge of radical ideology and pseudo-Islamic movements that use religion as a tool to achieve their own goals. **Thirdly**, the reduction of threats related to the smuggling of weapons and drugs, which act as sources of financing for the activities of radical groups and organized crime. **Fourth**, diplomatic support for the Tajiks and all other Persian-speaking peoples of Afghanistan. **Fifth**, the weakening of the geopolitical competition of global and regional powers in Afghanistan, which will provide an opportunity for the stable and peaceful development of this country.

Tajikistan's natural interests in Afghanistan (on a mutual basis) are unchangeable and have been formed in conditions of independence on the basis of real experience of interaction. The seizure of power by the Taliban, as already noted, makes the prospects for cooperation vague (since August 2021 there has been virtually no relationship), but they still deserve a short mention.

**Firstly, the expansion of trade and economic cooperation.** Afghanistan is an important area of Tajikistan's foreign economic relations in the southern direction. Afghanistan is both an object and a subject of international trade, having a transit potential connecting the states of South Asia and the Middle East. In this context, Afghanistan is more important for Tajikistan than Tajikistan for Afghanistan, because, having a border and transport infrastructure with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Kabul can develop trade and economic cooperation with the north.

**Secondly, the export of electricity and the connection of the energy systems of Central and South Asia.** Tajikistan occupies a leading place in the world in terms of existing reserves of environmentally friendly electricity. Dushanbe is a major supplier of electricity to Kabul and sells its products at a lower price than its neighbors. Another important project is the CASA-1000 transmission line, which will connect the countries of Central and South Asia through Afghanistan. Pakistan and India (in the future) are potential buyers of Tajikistan's electricity, which will be exported through power lines. The search for potential electricity markets for Tajikistan is a priority. Against this background, a stable and friendly Afghanistan promises us huge opportunities.

As for Afghanistan's interests in this area, **first** of all, any government of this country is interested in buying cheap electricity, since the country's electricity needs remain consistently high. In the medium term, Afghanistan does not have

the opportunity to realize its own energy potential, as there are more acute socio-economic problems; **secondly**, Tajikistan has its own power lines connecting the North and East of the country through the central part; **thirdly**, the transit of electricity provides Afghanistan with the opportunity to earn income and have at least some kind of influence tool. **Fourthly**, Tajikistan can provide Afghanistan with a service for training national personnel in the field of energy, which is important for the realization of human potential; **fifthly**, the diversification of electricity sources for Afghanistan reduces dependence on exporting countries and provides an opportunity for maneuver.

**Thirdly, cooperation in the field of transport and expansion of transit potential.** It is important for Tajikistan to expand its transit potential, and the Afghan direction opens up great opportunities for its implementation. Through the territory of Afghanistan, you can reach the seas, that is, the ports of Gwadar (Pakistan) or Chobahor (Iran). Both of these areas are of particular importance for Tajikistan. Another interesting project is the use of the Wakhan Corridor, which separates Tajikistan and Pakistan. The construction of a highway between Chitral (Pakistan) and Ishkashim (Tajikistan) will connect the road infrastructure of both countries and will enable both Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries to reach the port of Gwadar. Tajikistan is interested in expanding relations with the countries of South Asia, since this direction largely contributes to the achievement of the country's strategic goals: to break the communication deadlock and turn into a transit country. In this direction, Afghanistan is of particular importance: today, six bridges have been built over the Panj/Amu Darya River, and, according to the Minister of Transport of Tajikistan [40], the Nizhny Panj – Sherkhon – Bandar checkpoint is second only to the Fotekhobod – Oybek checkpoint (the border in the north with Uzbekistan) in terms of utilized capacity.

**Fourth, cooperation in the field of security.** This direction is an essential component and largely determines the nature of interstate relations. The political leadership of Tajikistan in all its meetings in bilateral and multilateral formats focuses on the situation in Afghanistan and the assistance of the international community to the peaceful settlement of the protracted conflict. Unfortunately, today, from the position of Tajikistan, the Taliban itself acts as a threat-forming factor. As noted above, believing that they will ensure security and minimize threats means appointing a wolf as a shepherd for sheep. Due to mutual distrust of the parties, this component of cooperation will be completely absent.

**Fifth, cultural and humanitarian cooperation.** The commonality of language and culture determines the basis for expanding cooperation in this important area. But, since the scope of Farsi usage is noticeably narrowing under the rule of the Taliban, this component will also be absent.

In general, the prospects for relations between Tajikistan and Afghanistan against the background of the Taliban's forceful seizure of power look vague.

## CONCLUSIONS

Tajikistan's position on the events in Afghanistan is dictated by the peculiarities of understanding its own national interests and existing public demands. This difference in the policy of official Dushanbe from other Central Asian countries makes it possible to assess the situation from different points of view and see a different point of view on the possible development of the situation in the short term.

Attempts to have a positive attitude towards the Taliban, which are observed today in the CAR – mean the desire of individual regional players to substitute the wish for the reality, but this does not prevent them from seeing irrefutable facts. And they are as follows: the current political structure of Afghanistan and its northern neighbors are, in fact, incompatible. Significant threats to the Central Asia countries come both from the practical experience of the Taliban and from the type of statehood that the Taliban intends to build. All five republics of Central Asia are consistently building secular nation-states, and in Afghanistan, with the arrival of the Taliban, a theocratic religious regime is being formed with a bias towards the traditions and customs of the Pashtuns. Ideological differences fundamentally shape challenges and threats for the Central Asian countries in the long term.

The crisis of legitimacy has made the Taliban outwardly compliant, and observation over the past eight months shows that they have learned a good lesson from their previous tenure in power: they play along with everyone based on values and their preferences. But, in fact, they have not fulfilled any of their obligations. The Taliban's assurances are seriously different from actions of this ruling party, but they have learned to make the promises that the others want to hear from them. We must not forget that today, according to the domestic legislation of the CAR countries, the Taliban movement is a banned terrorist organization and is under UN Security Council sanctions.

The experience of the Karzai and Ghani administrations shows that Central Asian countries need to pay important attention to planning and taking comprehensive measures to strengthen the foundations of their statehood and security. The key lesson of the events in Afghanistan is that assistance from external partners can be temporary and situational. In the protection and strengthening of the state system, no external factor plays such a role as the motivation and interest of its own citizens. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account this Afghan experience and understand that the Central Asian countries themselves and their citizens are most interested in stability, security and sustainable development.

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# AFGHANISTAN AS ONE OF THE KEY PRIORITIES OF UZBEKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD: RETROSPECTIVE AND PERSPECTIVE



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## **ABSTRACT**

The threats to the security and stable development of the Central Asian countries – the spread of terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and drug trafficking – emanating from unstable Afghanistan are of a long-term nature. These threats have different impact on countries of the region (due to the geographical factor), which causes somewhat different views of the countries of the region on the situation in Afghanistan. Therefore, the governments give different priorities to the Afghan problem (both in general and in its individual aspects).

## **KEYWORDS**

Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, foreign policy, stages of foreign policy, modernization, cooperation, threats and challenges, regional security.



## INTRODUCTION

An analysis of the foreign policy of independent Uzbekistan towards Afghanistan in the post-Soviet period allows us to distinguish two clearly distinguishable stages: the first stage (1991–2016) – the stage of distancing and cautious attitude towards Afghanistan; the second stage (2017 – present) – the stage of a sharp intensification of political, economic and humanitarian relations.

The analysis of Uzbekistan's foreign and foreign economic policy towards Afghanistan over the past thirty years, the definition of principles, approaches, areas of cooperation and its results makes it possible to determine the main priorities and formats of Uzbekistan's foreign policy for the medium term, taking into account the factor of the Taliban movement coming to power in Afghanistan and the new challenges that this brings, primarily for countries – Afghanistan's neighbors.

### ***1. Retrospective analysis of Uzbekistan's foreign policy in the Afghan direction until 2016: principles, approaches, areas of cooperation and results***

Due to geographical, geopolitical and geo-economic factors, Uzbekistan is one of the key players among Afghanistan's neighboring countries in the process of resolving the internal political situation in this country. The projects of the Afghan settlement cannot be implemented fully without taking into account the role of this factor. Based on this, Uzbekistan has been actively involved in the development of political and economic solutions aimed at resolving the conflict in Afghanistan over the past decades.

In July 2012, the Oliy Majlis (Parliament) of the Republic of Uzbekistan reviewed and approved the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which defined the foreign policy strategy for the medium and long term. As noted in the document, the main priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy is the Central Asian region, with which its vital interests are connected. According to the Concept, the problems of Central Asia should be solved by the countries of the region themselves without the involvement of external forces.

The development and adoption of the Concept of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy represented the quintessence of previous approaches, accumulated experience (both positive and negative) in solving security problems in the region. The document was a logical continuation of Uzbekistan's policy on the Afghan settlement. Assistance to the settlement of the situation in Afghanistan, ensuring peace and stability in the region, were stated in the Concept as one of the most important directions. It was emphasized that Uzbekistan's foreign policy activities, including in matters of assistance to the settlement of the situation in Afghanistan, are based on the following principles:

- conducting an open, friendly and pragmatic policy towards its closest neighbors;
- assistance in resolving the situation in Afghanistan on the principles of mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs;

- adopting political, economic and other measures to prevent its involvement in armed conflicts and hotbeds of tension in neighboring states, as well as not allowing the deployment of foreign military bases and facilities on its territory;
- no integration should be imposed from the outside, it is unacceptable if it infringes on the freedom, independence and territorial integrity of the country or is dictated by ideological obligations;
- Uzbekistan reserves the right to enter into unions, enter into the commonwealth and other interstate entities, as well as withdraw from them, guided by the highest interests of the state, the people, their welfare and security.

Uzbekistan's position on the resolution of the Afghan conflict was initially based on two main postulates:

- (i) recognition of the fact that settlement is impossible solely by military action;
- (ii) increasing the role and importance of the economic component in the program of conflict resolution and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan consistently acts in two interrelated directions: through participation in the implementation of economic projects, and parallel, diplomatic activities in order to unite the efforts of both the neighboring countries of Afghanistan and the United States/NATO, China and the Russian Federation.

At the diplomatic level, Uzbekistan's approaches in the 1990s were based on the recognition that developed situation in Afghanistan showed the need for coordinated international cooperation to establish a dialogue between the battling factions.

In 1997, at the initiative of Uzbekistan, the "6+2" format began to operate under the auspices of the UN, i.e. 6 neighboring countries – Pakistan, Iran, China, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and the guarantor countries – the United States and the Russian Federation. The purpose of this format was, first of all, to resolve the Afghan conflict through reconciliation of the Northern Alliance and the Taliban movement. Due to the activities of the Contact Group, on July 21, 1999, the Tashkent Declaration on the Fundamental Principles of the Peaceful Resolution of the Conflict in Afghanistan was signed in the presence of the opposing parties.

After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, Uzbekistan in 2008 proposed to form a Contact Group "6+3." Together with the countries bordering Afghanistan – Pakistan, Iran, China, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, it was proposed to include Russia, the United States and NATO in the Contact Group, taking into account the current realities. The purpose of this format was to unite efforts to find an optimal and peaceful solution to the problem of achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan, since the prevalence of military methods without solving socio-economic issues only exacerbates the situation. It was proposed to entrust the supervision and coordination of the activities of the Contact Group to the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan. It was also distinguished from the 6+2 format by the fact that neither representatives of the government structures nor the battling groups of Afghanistan would be included in the negotiation process within the framework

of the new group. However, this initiative of Uzbekistan has not received support.

The key idea of Uzbekistan regarding the resolution of Afghan conflict has always been the desire to reduce the level of the military component and pay more attention to the issues of economic recovery, as only this will reduce the level of conflict potential within Afghanistan. The priority should be to provide targeted economic assistance to Afghanistan.

In 2000s, Uzbekistan has accumulated significant experience in the implementation of joint projects for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, in particular in the field of road construction and road repair, electric power, railway construction, mining, education, and exchange of specialists. Uzbekistan has been actively cooperating with Kabul in the economic sphere since 2002.

As a result, mutual trade between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan has significantly expanded.

So, since 2007, there has been a noticeable increase in trade turnover between the two countries. If before 2005 the Uzbek-Afghan trade turnover did not exceed \$130 million, then in 2007 it already amounted to about \$326 million, in 2008 – \$ 520 million.

In 2010 Uzbekistan was among the top three importers of Afghanistan (after Pakistan – \$877 million and Russia – \$804 million). According to the results of 2010, the volume of trade turnover between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan amounted to \$663.5 million, in particular, exports – \$663.3 million, imports – \$0.2 million. The positive balance for Uzbekistan is \$663.1 million USD. In 2011, the volume of Uzbek-Afghan trade turnover amounted to \$798.6 million (exports – \$797.7 million, imports – \$0.9 million). The main goods supplied by Uzbekistan to Afghanistan were legumes – \$16 million, gasoline – \$82 million, diesel – \$109 million, crude oil – \$377 million, liquid gas – \$13 million, mineral fertilizers – \$2.8 million, fittings – \$103 million<sup>1</sup>.

As part of the implementation of the Afghanistan reconstruction program, Uzbekistan built 11 bridges on the Mazar-I-Sharif–Kabul section. The construction of a 220 kV high-voltage line with a length of about 442 km from Kabul towards the state border with Uzbekistan has been completed. This power line was connected to the electric power system of Uzbekistan through the construction of a power transmission line from the Surkhan substation (Uzbekistan) to the Hairaton substation (Afghanistan) with a length of 43 km. Through this high-voltage line, 150 MW of electricity was transmitted from the Uzbek power system at the first stage, and then up to 300 MW of electricity. The project cost was over \$198 million.

Uzbektelecom Joint-Stock Company and Afgan Telecom Corp, concluded an inter-operator agreement providing for cooperation in international services

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<sup>1</sup> According to the State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan.



Foreign policy Uzbekistan until 2017 in relation to Afghanistan was rigidly pragmatic

for the fiber-optic communication line (fiber optic line) under construction in Afghanistan, which connected both countries. The launch of the highway in 2009 with a capacity of 2.5 Gbit/s, provided an opportunity to organize direct communication between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan for international telephone services, access to Internet networks and access through Uzbekistan to CIS countries and far abroad.

One of the main problems hindering the growth of the Afghan economy and, in particular, the growth of industrial production in the country, is the lack of infrastructure – transport communications, water and energy supply networks, etc. In this direction, the implementation of the project for laying a railway through the territory of Afghanistan was important. In 2009–2010, the State Railway Company of Uzbekistan (Uzbekistan Temir Yullari) implemented a project for the construction of a section Khairaton – Mazar-I-Sharif railway with a length of 75 kilometers and a cost of 129 million USD. This railway has become the most important factor in increasing international cargo transportation in the country (about 3 million tons annually).

In the future, it was planned to lay a railway with a total length of 2 thousand km along the route “Mazar-I-Sharif – Kabul – Kandahar – Herat” and back, looping it to Mazar-I-Sharif. The total cost of this project, which would create a railway analogue of the Trans-Afghan Road Corridor from Europe with access to India, China, Iran and Pakistan, was approximately about \$3 billion USD.

However, in general, despite some positive aspects, by 2016, the futility of further progress of the anti-terrorist campaign within the framework of existing approaches became increasingly clear. Despite the actions taken by the

international community and the United States to ensure the security, stability and development of Afghanistan, the situation has not improved. In Afghanistan, as a result of more than 15 years of NATO's presence, it was not possible to resolve the most important issues: i) ensuring security; ii) forming a capable government; iii) conditions for sustainable economic development of the country were not created.

## ***2. President Sh. M. Mirziyoyev and the new foreign and outward-looking economic policies of Uzbekistan on the Afghan track after 2017***

Uzbekistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan until 2017 was rigidly pragmatic. It was based on the principles of the impossibility of solving the conflict in Afghanistan under military duress, the need to create conditions for the economic development of the country. In particular, through cooperation on the implementation of individual economic and infrastructure projects (construction of bridges, construction of the Khairaton – Mazar-I-Sharif railway, laying of a power transmission line from Southern Uzbekistan to Northern Afghanistan, etc.). However, Afghanistan was seen as a source of threats to national and regional security (the spread of terrorism and instability in general, drug smuggling).

But, since 2017, Uzbekistan's policy towards Afghanistan has gradually transformed and Afghanistan has been viewed not only as a source of threats, but also as a country with great potential for joint cooperation.

*In the political sphere* – active promotion of the new geopolitical format “Central Asia + Afghanistan,” when Afghanistan was proposed to be considered as part of Central Asia. As an example, we can consider the first meeting of the group “India + Central Asia + Afghanistan” in 2019 in Samarkand. The culmination of this policy was the holding, exactly one month before the Taliban movement came to power in Afghanistan, on July 15–16, 2021, of a major international conference in Tashkent “Central and South Asia: Regional interconnectedness. Challenges and Opportunities,” where the idea of Afghanistan's involvement in the Central Asian region was actively emphasized.

*In the economic sphere*, there was a breakthrough in bilateral trade and economic ties between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. Compared to 2015, the volume of trade turnover between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan by the end of 2020 increased by 74.4% and amounted to 776.9 million dollars. At the same time, Uzbekistan's exports for the specified period increased from \$444.4 to \$774.6 million. These are chemical products, non-ferrous and ferrous metals, energy carriers and petroleum products, food products, as well as services. The import of Afghan goods and services to the Uzbek market has also increased fourfold – from \$600 thousand to \$2.3 million [1. – ? p. 3]. In 2020, electricity exports to Afghanistan amounted to 2.6 billion kWh, and Uzbekistan covers 52% of Afghan electricity imports. In general, in recent years, Uzbekistan's share in Afghanistan's foreign trade has grown to 7.4%, while Afghanistan's share has grown to 1.5%.

Work has begun on the creation of a free trade zone “Termez International Trade Center,” which should become a key transport and logistics point on the way of goods to Afghanistan and South Asia in general.

*In the humanitarian sphere* – in 2018, an Educational center was established in Termez, where Afghan boys and girls have the opportunity to study in 17 areas of higher and 16 secondary specialized, vocational education, and by 2021 136 Afghan students have completed their studies at this center.

### ***3. Challenges for Uzbekistan's foreign policy after the Taliban movement came to power in Afghanistan***

In August 2021, after the capture of Kabul, the Taliban movement came to power in Afghanistan.

Several conclusions that can be drawn based on the analysis of this fact.

1. *From the point of view of political economy*, another attempt at modernization in Afghanistan, the fourth in the last hundred years, has failed. A military-political movement that has an anti-modernizing, fundamentalist character has come to power in Afghanistan.

2. *From a geopolitical point of view*, the configuration that has developed over the past twenty centuries with a permanent US military presence in the region has been destroyed. This creates new opportunities and new risks.

3. *From the point of view of geo-economics*, the new configuration of forces poses a cardinal question: how will projects in the field of transport and infrastructure, energy, which can link a large macro-region, including South Asia, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caspian region, be implemented (or will not be implemented)?

The emerging new geopolitical and geo-economic configuration poses a set of questions to the entire world community and, above all, to the neighboring countries of Afghanistan, among which is the key question: what should be the policy towards Afghanistan, headed by the Taliban?

And in this regard, the following issues are of crucial importance:

A) Will the Taliban be able to solve the key issue of ensuring security and preventing civil war? How will the main issue of intra-Afghan politics be solved: ensuring balance in cross-national, interethnic relations?

B) Will the Taliban really be able/willing to work in the direction of combating terrorist organizations present in the country (first of all, “ISIL – Viloyati Khorasan“)?

Uzbekistan has experience of how, after the Taliban came to power in 1996–2001, Afghanistan became a place of concentration of terrorist organizations (in particular, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), where they posed a real threat to regional security. And now the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan may lead to the fact that its territory may once again become a springboard for a variety of terrorist organizations (in particular, representatives of the Haqqani network have joined the new government. At the same time, this network has quite close



ties with Al-Qaeda). In addition, there has already been a surge in the activity of propagandists of terrorist organizations on the Internet, and the threat of extremism in cyberspace is growing. And this is a very real scenario, despite the reassuring statements of both Taliban propagandists and some external experts.

C) Another key question: if it is not possible to ensure stability, security in the country, create a normal business climate, then how to solve the issue of updating the problem of refugees from Afghanistan to neighboring countries?

D) The issue remains on the agenda – how will the Taliban solve the issue of drug production and their export of drugs from Afghanistan?

E) And, of course, the most important issue: what is the economic program of the government of Afghanistan, created by the Taliban and consisting mainly of its representatives?

But this is very important for the Government of Uzbekistan. Back in early 2021, the governments of both countries wanted to increase the trade turnover between the two countries to \$2 billion per year. It was planned to sign a preferential trade agreement between the two countries by the end of 2021. For Uzbekistan, the key issue is still the prospects for the implementation of the Mazar-I-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar railway route project, which has become the main project for the Uzbek government in the Afghan direction over the past year and a half, as well as the prospects for the construction of other transport corridors and a new Surkhan-Puli Khumri power transmission line.

The author conducted an express SWOT analysis to assess the potential of Uzbekistan in resolution of situation in Afghanistan, the implementation of economic projects.

## CONCLUSION

In view of the current situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban movement came to power in the country, Uzbekistan's foreign policy on the Afghan track will be oriented:

- on intensification of efforts to establish a political dialogue with Afghanistan (with all political forces inside Afghanistan), neighboring countries and leading centers of forces interested in preserving a unified Afghan statehood;
- on relying not only on multilateral formats (which unfortunately turned out to be ineffective in resolving the Afghan conflict), but, above all, on two-trilateral formats;
- on rendering all possible assistance in resolving the socio-economic problems of Afghanistan, supporting projects aimed at forming a viable and developing economy of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has accumulated serious experience in implementing reconstruction projects in Afghanistan and it is quite natural that it can initiate the implementation of projects important for the socio-economic development of Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan, as a country bordering Afghanistan, must develop new approaches in relation to the neighboring country and Uzbekistan's new foreign policy on the Afghan track, launched in 2017, is currently undergoing a tough test of strength.

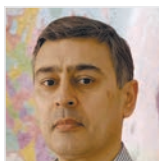
At the same time, it is important to understand that the search for new formats of interaction with Afghanistan should proceed from the immutable principle of implementing a strictly pragmatic foreign policy in the Afghan direction.



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# TRADE AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES: CONDITION AND PROSPECTS

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past 30 years, Afghanistan, bordering the Central Asian region (CAR), has changed power four times through armed confrontation, and the state structure has changed. These frequent political changes have become the main factor in the volatile political atmosphere, unstable military and socio-economic situation. Simultaneously with the departure of the “communist” government of the People’s Democratic Republic from the Afghan political life, which was replaced by the Islamic regime, and after a while the Taliban movement, new independent countries were formed on the territory of Central Asia after the collapse of the USSR. Over the last decade of the twentieth century, favorable conditions for the development of full-fledged trade, economic and diplomatic relations with successive Afghan authorities have not developed there. Nevertheless, trade with individual countries of the region was carried out in small volumes, negotiations were held on the implementation of specific infrastructure projects. In 2001, after another change of power and creation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA), relations with the Central Asian republics get to a whole new level. During the 20 years of existence of government created with the support of the West in Afghanistan, bilateral and multilateral agreements were concluded between the parties,



foreign trade developed, economic projects were implemented, negotiations were conducted to find ways to implement trans-Afghan transport and energy projects. The recapture of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021, on the one hand, led to the closure of international channels for financing all Afghan development projects, on the other hand, demonstrated the changed view of neighboring countries on the representatives of the new authorities, who caused fears even when they came to power for the first time. Now, along with measures to protect their own borders from possible threats that may come from Afghanistan, the Central Asian countries are thinking about finding new opportunities for cooperation with this country. The Central Asian countries generally positively assess the recent events in Afghanistan and are trying to build trade and economic relations with the unrecognized Taliban authorities, because they are confident that the active phase of the inter-Afghan conflict has already passed and acceptable conditions for practical action have been created. Brief information on demography and geography of the Central Asian countries and Afghanistan is presented at the beginning of the article, which is followed by the issues of development of trade and economic ties and trans-Afghan infrastructure projects, contribution of the countries of the region to solving the social and humanitarian problems of Afghanistan, as well as the impact of the intra-Afghan political situation on bilateral relations at the current stage and in the future.

## KEYWORDS

Central Asia, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, trade, economy, Taliban.

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of the development of trade and economic relations of Afghanistan with the Central Asian countries over the past 20 years has not been comprehensively studied in the scientific literature. Certain articles published in Internet resources, as well as printed publications [1; 2] are devoted to the relations of individual countries of the region with the IRA, economic cooperation of the regions of Central and South Asia [3], which directly or indirectly affect different aspects of the issue under consideration.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The article uses methods of comparative and retrospective analysis widely used in economics.

## RESULTS

An analysis of Afghanistan's bilateral relations with each of the Central Asian countries shows that it was after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 that full-fledged trade and economic relations were formed between the parties, the main areas of cooperation were identified. The change of the Afghan political power and the change of the state structure in August 2021 did not particularly affect the trade and economic policy of the countries of the region with Afghanistan, as evidenced by a slight decrease in the volume of mutual trade turnover in the last months of the past year, the frequency of meetings of official representatives of the countries with the new Afghan authorities.

Development of trade and economic relations with the Central Asian countries is a priority issue for modern Afghanistan. The countries of the region can be divided into two categories. The first includes neighboring Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the second – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which do not have a common border with Afghanistan. The total length of the border of the Central Asian countries with Afghanistan is over 2000 kilometers, the majority of which runs through high-altitude areas and is divided by the Panj and Amu Darya rivers. Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries occupy a large territory with sufficient natural and human resources. According to the estimates of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, as of 2020, the population of the Central Asian countries totaled over 72 million people. The population of Afghanistan is two times smaller – more than 36 million people (*see Table 1*).

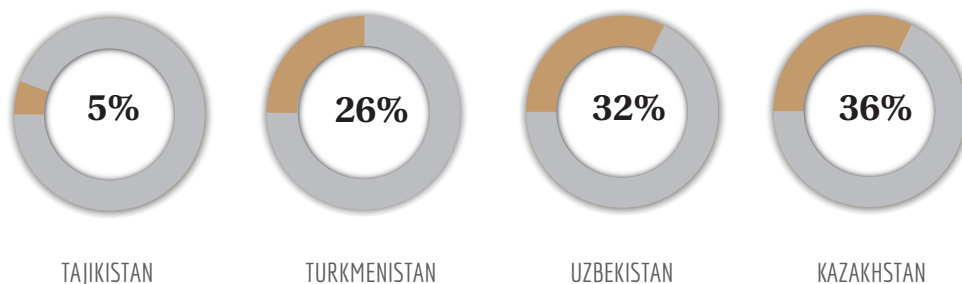
**Table 1. Area and population by country**  
(estimate for 2020)

Country	Population (million people)	Area of the territory (million sq. km)
Afghanistan	36	652.8
Central Asia		
Kazakhstan	18.7	2,724.9
Kyrgyzstan	6.4	199.9
Tajikistan	9.5	143.1
Turkmenistan	5.7	491.2
Uzbekistan	32	447
<b>Total</b>	<b>108.3</b>	<b>4,658.9</b>

The Central Asian countries have large reserves of oil and natural gas, as well as significant hydropower potential. The authorities of these countries may from time to time position themselves as defenders of the interests of representatives of related peoples from among Afghan subjects. According to Soviet researchers, 15–17% of the water resources of the Amu Darya basin are formed on the territory of Afghanistan [1, p. 28], which is important in conditions of declining reserves and annual growth in the consumption of drinking and irrigation water.

The volume of Afghanistan's trade with countries of the region has increased several times over the past two decades and continued to grow until the collapse of the IRA government. In the first years after the overthrow of the Taliban regime (2001), the Central Asian countries supplied goods to the Afghan market in small volumes, but gradually increased trade turnover, turning into a transit zone for exports from third countries, which was important for Afghanistan exclusively dependent on the Pakistani direction. By the end of the first decade, the situation began to change dramatically, since the Central Asian countries not only took the leading positions in the top 10 exporting countries to Afghanistan, but also in a certain period of time, some of them (for example, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) topped this rating in turns. The total share of Central Asian countries in the Afghan foreign trade turnover in 2009 was slightly less than 40%. However, in the future it decreased, and by 2011 it dropped to 25.7% [2, p. 232]. This was due to the growth of Afghanistan's trade with China and Iran. This share continued to persist until recent years, as evidenced by the available data: in 2018 it amounted to approximately 25%, in 2019 – 21.7% and in 2020 – 26.5% of the Afghan foreign trade turnover [3, p. 246].

### The share of CA countries in Afghan imports (2020)



Source: *Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2019*. P.246.

As for the commodity structure of Afghan imports, as of 2019, 29% were food products, 16% were fuel resources, 7% each were machinery and equipment, as well as metals [7, p. 242]. The role of the Central Asian countries in the export of electricity to Afghanistan is great: they account for a significant portion of the electricity coming from outside. According to the same data, in 2019 about 79%, and in 2020 over 83% of the electricity consumed in Afghanistan was imported from neighboring countries. The share of Central Asian countries in total electricity imports in 2020 was 84%, and in total consumption – 70% [6, pp. 191–192].

It should be noted that none of the countries in the region, as well as the entire world community as a whole, have yet officially recognized the Taliban government, but they continue to fulfill the agreements concluded with the IRA in various spheres, and are negotiating the development of relations in the field of trade and economy. The countries also exchange visits at the level of ministers and politicians: officials of the Central Asian countries meet with representatives of the interim Taliban government in Kabul.

### KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakhstan established diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in early 1992. At that time, instability in Afghanistan itself, along with the difficulties of the first years of the post-Soviet period did not contribute for Central Asian countries to establishment and development of relations in the field of economy, trade, education and other spheres. Therefore, full-fledged cooperation began only after the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001. The experience of the past two decades is an obvious indicator of the directions in which bilateral trade and economic relations between Afghanistan and Kazakhstan, in particular, and the countries of the Central Asian region, in general, can develop in the future.

According to Afghan statistics, in 2002 Kazakhstan exported goods worth \$22 million to Afghanistan, in 2009 – \$291 million, and its share of total imports from the region amounted to more than 22%, and of the total volume of Afghan

imports – 8.7%. Kazakhstan's exports to Afghanistan continued to grow in volume, but its share of the total remained at about the same level with slight fluctuations, amounting to 9.9% in 2020 [8, p. 215; 5, p. 232; 6, p. 246].

In 2007, the Kazakh-Afghan Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation was established, which played an important role in the development of bilateral relations. Within the framework of the agreement signed following the first meeting of the commission, Kazakhstan expressed interest in investing in Afghan infrastructure projects, intended to participate in tenders for development of oil, gas, copper and other minerals [9].

The development of trade was important, but the relations between the two countries were not limited to this and covered a variety of areas. Kazakhstan has contributed to the development of education of Afghan youth through the organization of a state educational program with a total cost of \$50 million, provided training opportunities for 1.000 Afghan students in Kazakh educational institutions. In order to develop cooperation in the field of education, in November 2009, the parties signed the “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on cooperation in the field of education,” ratified by Astana on July 15, 2010 [10].

Another important area for Afghanistan is food humanitarian aid, which was actively developed by Kazakhstan. The Afghan agricultural sector has not become able to provide the domestic market with essential goods, and the forces of nature have further aggravated the situation. In general, despite the annual financial and technical assistance received through various channels, until the last days of the IRA's existence, Afghanistan was acutely short of resources, needed additional support, since its own economy had not become self-sufficient, independent. According to data from Kazakh sources, the volume of assistance provided by Kazakhstan over the years has been quite large. For example, in 2002, food aid included 3 thousand tons of wheat, in 2008 – 2 thousand tons of wheat, in 2009 – 1.3 thousand tons of milk powder, in 2010 – 6 thousand tons of rice, in 2011 – 5 thousand tons of rice grits, in 2013 – 60 tons of buckwheat cereals and 160 thousand liters of vegetable oil. In 2014, Kazakhstan provided \$6 million food aid to Afghanistan [11].

In the field of economic assistance, Kazakhstan participated through allocating funds for the implementation of specific projects of social or economic significance. From 2008 to 2016, funds in the amount of \$2.38 million were provided for the construction of several facilities, mainly in the northern and central regions of Afghanistan. In particular, a school was built in Samangan province, a hospital in Bamyan province, and the asphalt road Talukan – Kunduz – Shirkhan – Bandar was repaired. There are also a number of other facilities built with the financial support of Kazakhstan [11].

The change of political power in August 2021, which ended with Taliban's takeover and greatly changed the general atmosphere in the country, did not lead to the cessation or decrease of Kazakhstan's activity in the Afghan direction. The first contact with the new authorities took place in Kabul on September 26 at the level of the Kazakh ambassador to Afghanistan and the acting head of the Afghan

Foreign Ministry of the Taliban government [12].

Kazakhstan, as well as many other countries in the region, today, when hopes for restoring stability in Afghanistan have been revived, looks with even greater optimism at the prospects for entering the markets of South Asian countries. But first of all, Kazakhstan is making efforts to establish and expand contacts with the current Afghan authorities in those areas where work has already been carried out in recent years.

At the meeting of Kazakh delegation with the Afghan authorities held in Kabul in mid-October 2021, both sides stressed their interest in restoring and further developing trade and economic relations. Kazakhstan expressed its readiness to restore educational programs for Afghan students in its educational institutions, to continue providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. It should be noted that the first allocated batch of aid consisted of 5 thousand tons of wheat flour. In addition, cooperation continues within the framework of programs of international organizations in the field of food aid to Afghanistan [13]. It is worth noting the purchase of 20 thousand tons of Kazakh flour by the UN World Food Program for the needs of the Afghan people [14].

At the end of December 2021, a delegation headed by the Minister of Trade and Integration of the Republic of Kazakhstan visited Kabul, where they held talks with the Afghan authorities on trade, transit and economic development. Afghan sources report on some agreements reached between the parties, which, however, was not confirmed in the official media of Kazakhstan. In particular, the Afghan media reported on establishment of a joint chamber of commerce and opening of representative offices of some Kazakh banks in Afghanistan [15]. Apparently, the Afghan press reported on proposals of the Afghan side, since it was the Acting Minister of Industry and Trade of Afghanistan Nuriddin Azizi at a press conference with the Minister of Trade and Integration of Kazakhstan Bakhyt Sultanov who mentioned that efforts are being made to create a joint chamber of commerce between the two countries, recalling the opening of branches of Kazakh banks in Kabul and the resumption of air corridor between Afghanistan and Kazakhstan for the development of trade relations [16].

Due to the fact that Afghanistan is limited in its own resources, Kazakhstan plays an important role in providing the country with food products, primarily grain. For example, the volume of exports between July 2020 and 2021 amounted to 2.2 million tons of wheat and flour [17], which reaches about 60% of total supplies. The import of Kazakh grain, despite the uncertainty of the political situation, persisted even after the Taliban came to power (in September 2021 it amounted to 15.6 thousand tons, and flour – 60.2 thousand tons) [18].

In general, the volume of trade turnover between the two countries over the last 10 months of 2021 has fallen, reaching \$345.9 million, which is 27% less compared to the same period of 2020 (\$477.1 million). However, it should be

**But first of all, Kazakhstan is making efforts to establish and expand contacts with the current Afghan authorities in those areas where work has already been carried out in recent years.**



noted that if Afghan imports from Kazakhstan showed a decline over the specified period of time, then exports, albeit slightly (\$3.7 million), but increased. As for the range of Kazakhstan's exports to Afghanistan, it consists of 45 products of such industries as food, petrochemical, chemical, metallurgical, light, machine-building, woodworking [19]. In general, in recent years, about 700 Kazakhstani companies, mainly represented by agro-industrial complex and food production, were engaged in the supply of products to Afghanistan [20], which indicates the importance of the Afghan market for Kazakhstan.

## KYRGYZSTAN

Unlike the rest of the Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan did not have large-scale infrastructure and economic projects and significant trade turnover with Afghanistan. Apart from the threat of terrorism, spread of extremism and drug trafficking, Kyrgyzstan has generally limited itself to some concern for fate of the Afghan Kyrgyz inhabiting the mountainous regions of the extreme north-east of Afghanistan – the Small and Large Pamirs.

Over the past two decades, according to Kyrgyz statistics, the small volume of mutual trade has tended to decrease. The volume of exports to Afghanistan has traditionally been significantly higher, while imports have been lower, and they have not undergone any significant changes over the past two decades. The decline in the volume of imports from Kyrgyzstan occurred at times sharply, as can be seen from the national statistics data, according to which in 2008, this figure reached \$45.9 million, in 2009 – \$18.8 million, and 2010 – \$9 million, and imports respectively, \$0.6, \$0.3 and \$1.4 million [21, p. 374]. In the first half of the second decade of the XXI century, there was again an increase in Kyrgyz imports with large downward fluctuations (2013 – \$12.3 million; 2014 – \$23.2 million; 2015 – \$9 million), and exports showed a slight increase – \$1.7; \$1.6 and \$1.9 million, respectively [22, p. 413]. Thus, in 2020, Afghanistan imported goods worth \$1.3 million from this country, and exported \$0.2 million [23, p. 335].

After fall of Kabul regime in August 2021, Kyrgyzstan was one of the first in Central Asia to start working with the new Afghan authorities represented by the interim Taliban government as part of humanitarian assistance. Practical steps began with the provision of humanitarian aid delivered to Kabul on September 23 by a delegation headed by the Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Kyrgyzstan. Further meetings of representatives of Kyrgyz authorities with their Afghan counterparts show that so far the parties are discussing only issues related to the situation in Afghanistan and consequences for the region, as well as practical mechanisms for providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. Kyrgyzstan, as noted above, continues to focus on the development of ethnic Kyrgyz. Kyrgyzstan has been engaged in training young personnel for Afghanistan and today is also ready to continue the program of assistance in the field of education by providing quotas to Afghan students in its universities [24].

Kyrgyzstan, however, has interests in regional and interregional infrastructure projects. CASA-1000 should be mentioned among the trans-Afghan projects in which Kyrgyzstan is directly involved. As part of this project, Kyrgyzstan intends

to supply electricity to the markets of Afghanistan and Pakistan in transit through Tajikistan. Work on implementation of Kyrgyz part of the project began in February last year [25]. In addition, Kyrgyzstan, like other Central Asian countries, is counting on the opening of trans-Afghan transport corridors, in particular for the transportation of goods as a transit territory between Iran and China.

## TAJIKISTAN

**As part of this project, Kyrgyzstan intends to supply electricity to the markets of Afghanistan and Pakistan in transit through Tajikistan.**

Tajikistan is one of the Central Asian countries that has a relatively long common border with Afghanistan. But, despite this, the volume of mutual trade turnover in the country is significantly lower than in the other three border countries with Afghanistan. By the beginning of this century, the only object connecting the two countries was a road bridge in Ishkashim, which served exclusively for the purposes of crossing humanitarian and other aid. In recent years, several more bridges have been built along the Tajik-Afghan border in such places as Tem (Khorog), Shogun (Vanj), Ruzvai (Darvaz), Shokhon (Shokhin), Kokul (Farkhar) and Nizhny Panj (Kumsangir). On their basis, along with implementation of export-import operations, retail border trade was conducted, which was carried out until the border was closed mainly by the local population of the mountainous regions of Afghanistan, which until recently had no transport links with their administrative centers and domestic markets. Despite the fact that there are so many contact points and common border, the volume of mutual trade turnover between the two countries is relatively low. According to Afghan statistics, until 2009, Tajikistan was not on the list of Afghanistan's main foreign trade partners, but since 2010, some figures are beginning to be reflected in official documents, which, apparently, is due to the quality of the data provided. Anyway, in 2010, the total trade turnover between the countries amounted to \$105 million (of which \$98 million were Tajik exports and \$7 million were imports), by 2012, the value of trade turnover reached \$270 million (\$258 and \$12 million, respectively) [23, pp. 242–243]. After reaching its peak in 2013 (\$284 million, in particular, \$281 million – imports from Tajikistan) there was a drop in trade volumes by 2019, more than twice [27, pp. 254–255; 7, pp. 243–244].

It is important to mention that among the Central Asian countries, only Tajikistan reacted negatively to the Taliban's takeover. First of all, it was a kind of political protest in response to the operation organized by the Taliban against the resistance forces in Panjshir province with population mainly consisting of Tajiks. Despite this, Tajikistan has not interrupted trade relations with Afghanistan,

namely transport communication, restored in a relatively short time, for cargo transport engaged in export-import operations. This is evidenced by the data of Tajik statistics, according to which in the last months of 2021, the commodity turnover between the two countries not only remained at the same level, but also showed a noticeable increase. For 9 months of this year, it amounted to \$76.7 million, which is 35.7% more than the same period in 2020. It is worth noting that in September 2022, the mutual trade turnover reached \$12 million.

Tajikistan supplies Afghanistan with a set of goods, including, first of all, construction materials, food, ferrous metals. But the main export item is electricity, which accounts for up to 60% of the total volume [28]. As for Afghan exports to Tajikistan, it has also not undergone significant changes, as evidenced by data according to which in 2020 it amounted to \$3 million [6, p. 245], and in 11 months of 2021 – \$2.5 million [29].

Tajikistan is the second largest supplier of electricity after Uzbekistan to Afghanistan, but due to the shortage of electricity during the cold weather in the country, these supplies are seasonal. In 2018, its share in Afghan electricity imports was 18%, in 2019 – 29% and in 2020 – 18% [6, p. 191]. It is obvious that in the future, as the production capacity of the supplier countries increases, competition between them for the Afghan market will also grow. Therefore, Tajikistan, despite the negative attitude towards the events taking place in Afghanistan, as well as the low solvency of the Afghan national energy company “Breshna,” continues to fulfill its obligations to Afghanistan within the framework of previously concluded agreements. At the end of December last year, the Tajik state energy company “Barki Tojik” in Tashkent signed an additional agreement with Breshna on the supply of electricity. There have been no other bilateral meetings on any topic between the two countries at the level of the authorities so far.

The government of Tajikistan, in connection with the aggravation of the economic crisis in Afghanistan, namely the humanitarian situation, at the end of November,



Tajikistan

**TAJIKISTAN IS ALSO INTERESTED IN OPENING TRANSPORT LINKS THROUGH AFGHANISTAN WITH OTHER COUNTRIES TO EXPAND TRADE RELATIONS AND GAIN ACCESS TO THE NEAREST SEAPORTS OF THE PERSIAN GULF.**

within the framework of the UN World Food Program, began providing food aid to Afghanistan in the form of 2.5 thousand tons of wheat flour [30].

As for trans-Afghan infrastructure projects, CASA-1000 project is relevant for Tajikistan, a country with a large hydropower potential, which provides an opportunity to sell excess electricity not only in the market of Afghanistan, but also in Pakistan. It is important to note that the length of the future Sangtuda (Tajikistan) – Noushera (Pakistan) power line will be 750 km, of which only 117 km should pass through the territory of Tajikistan. Construction work on completion of the Tajik section, despite the recent events in Afghanistan, continues.

Tajikistan is also interested in opening transport links through Afghanistan with other countries to expand trade relations and gain access to the nearest seaports of the Persian Gulf. The complete stabilization of the situation in the neighboring country and improvement of diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and Iran can contribute to the growth of trade volumes, in particular transit through Afghanistan. All this forces the parties, despite some political differences, to maintain stable relations.

## **TURKMENISTAN**

In the 1990s, after the Taliban's takeover in Kabul, neighboring Turkmenistan was among the few countries that actually recognized their power, negotiated, and discussed the implementation of economic projects. Since then, Turkmenistan has been making every effort to implement a major regional energy project – the Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan – India (TAPI) gas pipeline.

The first indicator of mutual trade and economic relations, as in the case of other countries, is the volume of foreign trade turnover, the growth rates of which between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan in the first decade of the XXI century were not as high as in most other countries of the region. This is evidenced by the data of Afghan statistics, according to which, as of 2002, the volume of imports from Turkmenistan amounted to \$50 million and until 2008, it gradually went downwards, and then increased, reaching the level of \$81 million. In the future, rapid growth was observed (by 2015 – up to \$642 million) [8, p. 215; 27, p. 255].

Turkmenistan, along with Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, is a supplier of electricity to Afghanistan. The country has invested a lot of money in the construction of power lines to export electricity to Afghan consumers. Due to the low purchasing power of the Afghan side, the Turkmen authorities repeatedly made concessions and wrote off the debts accumulated by the Afghan side for electricity as part of humanitarian aid programs. According to the available data, Turkmenistan is inferior to two other countries in the region that supply electricity.

The repeated seizure of power by the Taliban did not lead to any changes in the nature of Turkmenistan's trade and economic relations with Afghanistan. Two weeks after the fall of Kabul, Turkmenistan resumed technical work on the 30 km

long Akina – Andkhoy railway section passing through the territory of Afghanistan. Turkmenistan continues active discussion of plans for development of railway links with the border areas of Afghanistan with the prospect of connecting to major cities and further to Iran and Pakistan. The most striking example is Kerki – Imamnazar – Akina – Andkhoy railway line, completed in early 2021 [31].

Turkmens are also actively working with the Interim Government of Taliban to discuss humanitarian, trade and economic issues. The first contact took place on September 29 in Kabul. The Ambassador of Turkmenistan met with the Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan Amir Khan Muttaki. A large delegation from Turkmenistan arrived in Kabul on October 30, where they discussed with the Afghan authorities a range of issues related to the economy, politics and security. In particular, the issue of ensuring the security and uninterrupted operation of future trans-Afghan energy facilities, as well as other economic projects, was discussed with representatives of the Afghan law enforcement agencies. In early January, during the visit of the Turkmen delegation to Kabul, the parties in particular discussed the issues of the development of joint infrastructure projects. As is known, Turkmenistan not only develops trade and economic relations with Afghanistan but is also optimistic about the prospects for implementation of trans-Afghan energy and transport projects. Special attention is still paid to the construction of the TAPI gas pipeline, as well as Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan power transmission line [31].

It is worth noting that Turkmenistan is on the list of countries that were the first to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan (September 1). The first batch consisted exclusively of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies. The next aid from Turkmenistan was sent in mid-December and included food, textiles, household products, petroleum products. In total, it was 1.2 thousand tons of cargo, 20 railway tanks with petroleum products [32].

Since the Taliban came to power, no armed conflicts or incidents have been recorded in the border areas with the northern neighbors. Only in the first days of this year, reports appeared in the media about an incident between Turkmen border guards and Taliban militants, but the information was not confirmed in official sources on both sides. However, unnamed sources pointed to the fact of a clash between the parties. Nevertheless, the time that has passed since then shows that in such situations, the parties can quickly resolve issues.

## UZBEKISTAN

The practice of recent years has shown the importance of Uzbekistan as a trade partner and transit territory for Afghanistan. The volume of mutual trade between the countries has increased many times over the past two decades. Although during the period when coalition forces were in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan accounted for 40% of the transit of non-military goods, nevertheless, net mutual trade increased in volume at a fairly rapid pace. According to Uzbek statistics, in 2001, exports (including re-exports) to Afghanistan amounted to \$11,067 thousand, a year later reached \$61,500 thousand, and by 2008, exceeded half a billion dollars and, according to Afghan statistics, Uzbekistan became the leader of the list of Afghan

importers, ahead of the traditional supplier of goods – Pakistan. It should be noted that during these years Uzbekistan supplied up to 70% of the fuel consumed in the country to Afghanistan, but then Iran to some extent won back the initiative. Nevertheless, the share of Uzbekistan as a whole remains considerable in the structure of Afghan imports. For Uzbek producers, the Afghan market has become an important destination, and Afghanistan itself has entered the top 10 importing countries from Uzbekistan [33; 6, p. 246]. Thus, according to Uzbek sources, in 2019, the total trade turnover with Afghanistan amounted to \$619.9 million, of which \$617 accounted for exports and only \$3 million for imports from Afghanistan [34], while according to the Afghan statistical yearbook, only exports from Uzbekistan were estimated at the level of \$428 million [8, p. 191].

In 2020, Uzbekistan mainly exported foodstuffs and live cattle in the amount of \$276.4 million (35.5% of the total volume), mineral fuels, lubricants and similar materials – \$162.7 million (21%), industrial goods – \$72.3 million (9.3%). Considering the political conditions existing in the neighboring country, Uzbekistan expected to increase the volume of mutual trade with Afghanistan to \$2 billion by 2023. To increase the export potential, it was planned to build an international trade center in Termez with an annual turnover of \$500 million. In addition to conducting trading activities, the center was supposed to include points of acceptance, storage, processing, sorting and packaging of products [31]. As part of plans to increase the volume of mutual trade turnover, the parties intended to sign a “Preferential Trade Agreement” by the end of last year. Time will tell how much the changed conditions may affect these plans. But one thing can be said for sure: the Uzbek authorities are positive about the development of mutual trade relations.

As the practice of recent months has shown, Uzbekistan focuses its greatest attention on expanding its own presence in the Afghan market and opening transit trade with other countries as soon as possible. Despite the existing difficulties, practical steps have already been taken in this direction to demonstrate the possibility of resuming transit cargo transportation. Thus, Uzbekistan and Pakistan symbolically exchanged columns of trucks [35].

Uzbekistan today pays close attention to the humanitarian situation that has arisen in Afghanistan. A month after Taliban seized the power in Kabul, Uzbek authorities sent 1.3 thousand tons of humanitarian aid to low-income Afghan families, consisting of food, medicines, and clothing. The next batch of aid with a total weight of 4 thousand tons arrived by rail to Afghanistan on December 23, 2021, and included food, clothing and coal.

According to data for 2018 and 2020, Uzbekistan accounted for 52% of Afghan electricity imports. Its share in the total volume of imports from the region was 62% [6, p. 215].

The role of Uzbekistan in the development of the northern direction of Afghan foreign trade is great, since with the direct participation of the country, the first Afghan railway with a length of 75 km was built connecting the two countries. It helped to reduce the time and money costs associated with the transportation of goods in both directions. Moreover, Uzbekistan’s long-term plans are related to the construction of the Trans-Afghan Railway to open land communication with Iran

and Pakistan bordering Afghanistan. In February 2021, a trilateral meeting between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan discussed the Trans-Afghan Railway project on Mazari-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar route. It was planned to attract \$4.8 billion of credit funds for its implementation. It is worth noting that the possibility of financing the project was considered by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Investment Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the International Development Finance Corporation (USA). In case of favorable conditions, according to some estimates, this route could reduce the travel time between Uzbekistan and Pakistan from 30–35 to 10–15 days [36].

## CONCLUSIONS

**Uzbekistan today pays close attention to the humanitarian situation that has arisen in Afghanistan.**

The presented material shows the level of development of trade and economic relations of the Central Asian countries with Afghanistan before the Taliban seized power, the current state, role and place of each of the country in the Afghan foreign trade, economic, social and humanitarian spheres, as well as the importance of Afghanistan itself for the economy of these countries. The development of relations between the countries of the region and Afghanistan over the past three decades has been directly dependent on intra-Afghan political situation. The practice of recent decades has shown that a politically stable and secure Afghanistan can really open a window of opportunity for the Central Asian countries to gain access to the markets of other countries.

Central Asian countries with a predominantly Muslim population, especially at the current stage of development, should be most concerned about the terrorist and drug threat emanating from Afghanistan, and the spread of extremist ideas. Therefore, with politically stable and economically developing neighbor, such issues are not only removed from the agenda, but it also becomes possible to develop own production focused on foreign markets. This once again confirms that Afghanistan's northern neighbors, however, like all its other neighbors, are interested in stabilizing the intra-Afghan situation. This will ultimately be facilitated by focusing on expanding trade ties, implementing infrastructure, in particular, trans-Afghan transport and energy projects. Such attention will help to connect Afghanistan with the infrastructure of the region in the future.

On the other hand, competition for the Afghan market may increase between the Central Asian countries, since most of them are suppliers of homogeneous products (in particular, electricity). Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan supply electricity to Afghanistan, the needs of which are not yet fully covered.

Afghanistan's own resources are not able to meet the needs of the population and the economy in full. This means that the country will continue to rely on imports from neighboring countries.

Export of food products remains another important direction for these countries. Despite the external economic and technical assistance received over 20 years, the Afghan agricultural sectors are in an unsatisfactory state, which keeps the demand for food products at a high level. Kazakhstan remains the leader in this regard and in the future may retain an important place in the Afghan grain market, increasing the volume of supplies.

The Central Asian countries, unlike some other countries bordering Afghanistan, are more interested in developing bilateral trade and economic relations, and to a lesser extent pursue geopolitical goals and interests. The development of relations in this direction would allow Afghanistan to diversify the directions of its foreign relations, reduce dependence on trade and transit along traditional routes. The countries under consideration look with hope at the plans to implement trans-Afghan infrastructure projects and, with a favorable development of the intra-Afghan political situation, they will not only be able to maintain the previous volumes of trade turnover, but also be able to expand it. Accordingly, the budget of Afghanistan will receive new sources of income.

Due to its internal policy, the Taliban Government is still feeling strong diplomatic pressure. The international community puts the issue of creating an inclusive government with the participation of representatives of all ethnic, religious and political groups as the main condition for political recognition. But the Taliban movement also has an internal confrontation. As a result, all this hinders the resolution of economic and humanitarian problems, complicates the work of the new authorities, creates some uncertainty, and slows down the development of the national economy.

Economic pressure, along with diplomatic pressure, is an important lever for forcing the Afghan authorities to turn to the path of softening their policies on many social issues. The Taliban's six-month period in power shows that, despite the difficult socio-economic conditions and without the intervention of external players, the intra-Afghan political situation can remain stable. With situation remaining stable and fulfillment of conditions of the international community for creation of an inclusive government, there will be real ground for restoration of the Afghan economy, for development of trade and economic ties, in particular with neighboring countries, for implementation of trans-Afghan transport and energy projects.



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