

AFGHAN CRISIS: HISTORIC BACKGROUND AND CURRENT SPECIFICS

ULUGBEK KHASANOV

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet system and the emergence of new sovereign states in the early 1990s radically changed the geopolitical configuration of Eurasia. The need to adapt to the changed international political situation had a major impact on the emergence of Central Asia as a new geopolitical region of the world. From the very beginning, not only regional factors but also global ones played a major role in this process.

From the very beginning, we had to take into account the fact that different parts of the former USSR now border different regions of Eurasia, which in many respects have little comparability with each other (Europe, Iran, South Asia, China, etc.). Accordingly, the variants of this influence vary from potentially positive to sharply negative (Tajikistan-Afghanistan).

As the situation in the region worsened throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the consequences of the war in Afghanistan were emphasized. Many studies specifically emphasized that the U.S., with the active support of Pakistan and in the context of the confrontation between the two superpowers, made a huge contribution to arming and training the combat forces of the "new enemy of the Western democratic world" [2. - p. 37-43]. In the future, the development of this situation is characterized by two points: the practical creation of the Taliban movement by Pakistan and the strengthening of the anti-Western position of Islamic radicals in the light of the war in the Persian Gulf and the situation on the Arabian Peninsula. The factors that determine the specifics of international radicalism in general deserve some

attention.

Suffice it to recall that the Taliban movement's rise to power in Afghanistan in the late 1990s created a certain "bridgehead" in the form of an entire country, which, in addition, enjoyed diverse support from Pakistan and financial assistance from a number of Middle Eastern states. All this together made it possible in the 90s to train personnel and coordinate efforts in the organization of activities and participation in military operations in India (in Kashmir and other areas), in the southern Philippines, against China in Xinjiang, Egypt, Russia (in Chechnya and Dagestan), as well as in the countries of Central Asia [3].

In this regard, it should be noted that Afghanistan will retain its special role in the development of the whole complex of interstate relations in the region. This importance is determined by a number of factors, first of all, by the fact that many nationalities of Afghanistan have ethnic commonality with the population of Central Asia. In many previous years, instability, and a significant number of uncontrolled, and even controlled, armed formations also turned Afghanistan into a "hotbed of tension along the entire perimeter of the southern borders of the Central Asian states". Attempts by some leaders of Afghanistan's national groups to use the Central Asian card in their struggle for central power in Kabul have for a long time had a rather noticeable negative impact on regional politics in general, as evidenced by the mutual harsh diplomatic rhetoric of the leadership of Tajikistan and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Islam in the Central Asian states is increasingly becoming a force to be reckoned with by governments. This is why the heads of all Central Asian states, regardless of their political orientation, appeal to Islamic values in order to mobilize public opinion and generate some popularity and support for their political course. Nevertheless, it is unlikely at present that the emerging situation will be hostile to Russia, since militant Islam occupies only a minor place in the spectrum of the entire Islamic movement in Central Asia, while moderate Muslim movements are in favor of preserving historically established ties with Russia. It should also be taken into account that the current leadership

of the republics, expressing its intention to ensure stability in the region at any cost, is preventing Islam from becoming a dominant political force.

Central Asia is a region that is rediscovering and opening up to the outside world. Its development is, in fact, just beginning. The promising opportunities of Central Asia make it, like the Trans-Caucasus, an object of geopolitical interest for many countries of the world; accordingly, the region is becoming a place where the interests of global and regional centers of power collide. For their part, the states of the region do not intend to be passive witnesses of the changes taking place in the world. Already now we can observe the activation of their policies, and this process, it should be thought, will be proportionally intensified as their economic and political situation strengthens.

It should be noted that in previous years the U.S. pursued a policy of double standards towards the Taliban, supporting them with arms and money through Pakistan, bypassing the UN sanctions [4. - R. 47]. Only the presence of Al-Qaeda on the territory of Afghanistan prevented the U.S. from reaching an agreement with the Taliban and further trying to use them to exert at least indirect pressure on strategically important regions - South and Southwest Asia and China. It is noteworthy that the 1999 and 2000 U.S. State Department reports on international terrorism. Afghanistan was mentioned as a threat precisely because of its support and harboring of Al-Qaeda and a number of other terrorist groups but was not included in the number of countries sponsoring international terrorism [5], which since 1993 the U.S. has traditionally included Cuba, DPRK and Iraq [6. - R. 39-42].

It can be assumed that the U.S. used the Afghan factor to strengthen its position in Central Asia. Back in October 1999, the U.S. Department of Defense transferred the right to lead U.S. forces in Central Asia from the Pacific Command to the Central Command. Since the Central Command already controls U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf region, its assumption of control over Central Asia means that this region will be given increased attention by those whose main task is to protect the interests of the United States and its allies.

The Taliban's network structure, devoid of a rigid hierarchy, has provided it with a high degree of self-protection. This situation is likely to persist until the strategy and tactics for overcoming such challenges are brought by the international community to the same highly organized level of international cooperation as the network itself, especially given its interaction with internationalized syndicates of closely related radical groups. Indeed, it is precisely because of its network ties to multiple groups that the Taliban has diversified its operational tactics for nearly three decades, ranging from guerrilla operations to targeted attacks by individual cells. As noted by noted Orientalist scholar Muhammad Amir Rana, "Even non-Taliban groups in North and South Waziristan, while showing their sympathy for the Taliban, also sometimes referred to themselves as 'local Taliban,' such as the groups of Mullah Maulavi Nazir and Qori Gul Bahadur" [7] [7]. They remain concentrated within Afghanistan.

In addition, the very specificity of the "Afghan" vector in international relations testifies, first of all, to the multiplicity of factors that contributed to the emergence and expansion of the insurgency in Afghanistan. Among the most significant of these are: "...the militant traditions of local tribes, the spread of a "culture of jihad" after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; the establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in the 1990s and its cascading effect in the territories of the Tribal Zone; the "war on terror" after September 11, 2001 and the concentration of Pakistani and transnational militant networks in the region; and the political, structural, and administrative vacuum in the country over the past 30 years" [Ibid. [Ibid]. The insurgency can be categorized into three major phases depending on its changing characteristics and the response of coalition forces.

The period between 2002 and 2007 was the formative phase of the Tribal Zone insurgency, which by 2009 had developed into a full-fledged insurgency through the tribal areas. In addition, "...between 2002 and 2010, more than 60 local Taliban groups emerged in the region, which also included small groups in the populated areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Initially, about 40 Taliban groups were part of

the alliance, and this number continued to grow in the following years" [8]. Similarly, "...14 Taliban groups were part of another Taliban alliance known as the Waziri alliance, led by the aforementioned Maulavi Nazir and Qori Gul Bahadur" [9].

Many of these groups already had networks in the tribal areas, and with the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban, members of a number of these groups joined its ranks. Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban fighters fled during U.S. attacks in Afghanistan in late 2001. Militant groups began to appeal to the Muslim Ummah, based on a common religion, i.e. Islam, against the Western occupation of Afghanistan and signaled a new phase of jihad at that time. In addition, to better understand the growth of Taliban insurgency in the tribal areas of Pakistan, it is important to consider the peculiarities of the social structures in the Tribal Area and the weaknesses of its governance system [1].

The Taliban used this weak governance system and weakened it further to create space for their consolidation and increased support from the population of the Federally Administered Areas. To this end, they increased attacks on the tribal administrative system, including mainly political agents-federal civilian bureaucrats in the Tribal Area as well as elders [9]. Once they were able to create space to operate and promote their ideology, Taliban fighters began offering parallel security and justice systems to tribal people, establishing their own courts in almost all parts of the Tribal Area and in some populated areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The lack of an effective legal system also exacerbated people's discontent with the state's inability to deliver justice.

In general, analyzing the characteristics and dynamics of the Taliban insurgency in order to study its active forces and attributes has always been a difficult task. Since its inception, the Taliban movement has gone through many curves and has marked itself as an established political force in the political arena of Afghanistan [10.- R. 19]. The presence of affiliated with "Al-Qaeda" and "Islamic State" on the one hand and the clear predominance of the influence of the Afghan Taliban on almost the entire territory of Afghanistan on the other, as well as the presence of a clear confrontation between them, do not

indicate the establishment of stability and security in the country, and therefore it is worth dwelling on the most significant of them.

The emergence of an influential wing of the movement known as Tahrik-eTaliban-Pakistan, deserves special consideration. Formed in 2007 by Baitullah Mehsud in the tribal territory of South Waziristan, the group in its early years migrated to the cross-border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and many of its leaders settled on the Afghan side of the border, especially after the massive Pakistani army operation in North Waziristan in 2014. [11]. Today, significant numbers of its units are present in the Tribal Areas, or so-called Federally Administered Tribal Areas, of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, Karachi, and Balochistan. Their support structures are present mainly in the suburbs of Quetta and other Pashtun-dominated areas, especially along the Afghan border. In other words, the Pakistani Taliban's critical militant infrastructure has settled within Afghanistan since the famous 2014 Operation Zarb-e-Azb [Ibid]. In addition, the leadership crisis within the movement has brought significant discord to its activities. A large faction led by Omar Khorasani formed his own group, Jamaatul Ahrar¹ all in the same year of 2014. According to some scholars, many Pakistani Taliban field commanders chose to support the IS, including key leaders such as Sheikh Maqbool of Shahidullah Shaheed, Hafiz Dolat, a Taliban leader in Orakzai Agency; Gul Zaman, a cell leader in Kurram Agency; Mufti Hasan, a leader in Khyber Agency; and Khalid Mansoor, the head of the movement in Hangu [Ibid]. It should be noted here that the Pakistani Taliban traditionally held Sunni Deobandi views, which were characterized by an anti-Pakistani, anti-Western character, and were aimed at fighting all those whom it considered "enemies" of Islam and Muslims," and it was from these positions that it opposed "Jamaatul Ahrar" -a movement banned in Russia.

Changing Reality

The emergence of IS and associated activity among the Pakistani militant element has revealed contradictions and divergences with al-

Qaida's programmatic goals. Because of the serious internal conflict between the two, al-Qaeda has shifted its focus in recent years to Yemen and Syria. Al-Qaeda's ability to increase its popularity and maintain credibility among local allies has thus been markedly narrowed, although the emergence of the so-called "al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent," which aims to establish a caliphate of Khorasan that would also include India, has been noted since late 2014. Sheikh Asim Umar, personally backed by Ayman al-Zawahiri and formerly representing jihadists from Harkatul Jihad Islami, which was strongest in Helmand province, a Taliban stronghold in Afghanistan, led the group until his removal.

The other group is Lashkar-e-Islam , a militant outfit operating until recently from Khyber Agency since 2004. Originally formed by Haji Namdar and Mufti Munir Shakir, it merged with Tahrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan, once its fierce rival, in 2010; its leadership has now also moved to Afghanistan. The group aimed to enforce Islamic law in Khyber Agency and eradicate so-called un-Islamic practices. The group openly resists the influence of its rivals, An Sarul Islam and Tawhidul Islam [12]. East Turkestan Islamic Movement is an anti-Chinese group founded by militant Uighur Islamists in Xinjiang province in western China. Mufti Abu Zar al-Beruni is the group's main leader; most of the militants moved to Afghanistan on their own or partly with the Pakistani Taliban. Finally, one of the most influential structures of the movement is traditionally recognized as the Haqqani Network, which for many years controlled important border corridors in the cross-border zone between Afghanistan and Pakistan. "The Haqqani Network is led by Sirajuddin Haqqani. After the Taliban gained full control of the country, namely on September 7, 2021, he was appointed Minister of Interior of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and enjoys the personal support of the head of government, Haibatullah Akhund.

Already in the current and extremely difficult economic situation, the Taliban government is well aware of the need to demonstrate its willingness and ability to deal with multiple challenges, namely the expulsion of foreign fighters from Afghanistan. By fulfilling its

commitments to toughening its stance against radical religious militant groups and ensuring political stability in the country, the Taliban will also be able to win the trust, first and foremost, of its closest neighbors - the Central Asian states and the world's leading powers. On the one hand, the political authorities in Afghanistan are extremely interested in the recognition of their legitimacy by the international community, the lifting of international sanctions, unfreezing of the state assets of the Central Bank, establishment of credit of trust, and full inclusion in foreign aid programs for economic recovery, and on the other hand, for many years they have maintained ideological closeness and ties of "militant brotherhood" with a number of well-known groups of radicals and militants in the conditions of tough armed resistance.

No less complicated and extremely controversial in the political agenda of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is the factor of Pakistan, namely, the active attempts of the Pakistani leadership to negotiate with the Pakistani wing of the Taliban [15]. This situation can shake the already difficult relations within the leadership of the movement, which will certainly lead to a deepening of the division of interests within the movement into Afghan and Pakistani. At the same time, the leadership of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is unlikely to aggravate relations with Pakistan, as Pakistan was one of the leading parties that lobbied for the opening of the movement's representative office in Doha and the beginning of negotiations with the United States. In turn, Pakistan will not dare to aggravate relations with the Taliban for fear of losing influence over them.

The Central Asian states, having extensive borders with Afghanistan, proceed from the consensus on the issue of full-scale inclusion of neighboring Afghanistan in regional economic processes. It is impossible to define a common regional agenda without taking into account the Afghan factor. According to S. Safoyev, a high-ranking Uzbek senator and experienced diplomat, "Afghanistan has the potential to become a regional trade center", and "...the neighbor needs a North-South transport corridor" [21]. [21].

Therefore, comprehensive assistance to the socio-economic recovery of their southern neighbor becomes one of the priority tasks.

For example, since the beginning of 2017, the volume of Uzbekistan's trade turnover with Afghanistan has increased by 25%, amounting to about 600 million dollars [19]. Within the framework of the previously adopted Roadmap for Development of Cooperation, annual deliveries of mineral fertilizers, products and components of agricultural machinery, hundreds of thousands of tons of different varieties of cereals, and other types of food to the southern neighbor have not stopped. The issues of deepening the geo-economic potential and opportunities of the trans-Afghan corridor Termez - Mazar-e-Sharif - Kabul - Peshawar, the road and railway China - Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan, the establishment of the Regional Center for the Development of Transport and Communication Relations at the UN, the Regional Council on Transport Communications, the development of joint measures to create a common energy space, a single energy ring in Central Asia are coming to the forefront [20].

Water as a Hard Concern

The Taliban leadership has initiated a program aimed at enhancing agricultural endeavors in the devastated valleys of Northern Afghanistan. The objective of this endeavor is to construct the Kosh Tepa Canal in order to harness the agricultural potential of the nutrient-rich soil found in the region.

On March 30, 2022, the Taliban government issued a formal communication pertaining to the prospective development of the Kosh Tepa Canal inside the borders of Afghanistan. The primary aim of the canal is to enhance the efficient distribution of water resources from the Amu Darya River to the northern regions of the nation, including Balkh, Jawzjan, and Faryab. The primary objective of this project is to provide irrigation to an estimated 550,000 hectares of land in the aforementioned areas. It is anticipated that the canal will have a length of 285 kilometers, a width of 100 meters, and a depth of 8.5 meters.

The Kaldar area in Balkh province is anticipated to serve as the site of its origin. The potential revitalization of Afghan lands, enhancement of agriculture, and generation of employment possibilities in many agricultural sectors may be achieved by the

extraction of around 17 cubic meters of water from the Amu Darya River. This endeavor has the capacity to engage a workforce exceeding 6,000 individuals. The anticipated enlargement of the Kosh Tepa Canal instills optimism for the future economic well-being of the agricultural regions, given its substantial contribution to the income of more than 80% of the populace.

Afghanistan has a considerable abundance of water resources since more than 80 percent of its water supply originates from the Hindu Kush mountains via snowfall in the northeastern area. This facilitates effective water drainage into the main river networks. The lack of comprehensive water infrastructure across the nation persists as a consequence of enduring political and social unrest. The construction of the Kosh Tepa Canal signifies a pivotal undertaking with the objective of mitigating persistent water shortages and revitalizing agricultural practices. The precise implementation of this remedy is of utmost importance in effectively resolving a problem that has been consistently overlooked over an extended duration.

In addition, the enhancement of cultivable land has the potential to greatly enhance the overall welfare of the Afghan population. The significance of this issue is heightened by the concerning data presented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which reveals that almost 17 million inhabitants in the nation have inadequate access to vital food supplies. The implementation of the canal infrastructure has had a substantial influence in effectively tackling the problem of opium cultivation. Based on statistical data from 2018, it can be shown that the drug trade makes a substantial contribution of around 80% to the gross domestic product (GDP) of the nation. The allocation of land in the northern regions of Afghanistan with the purpose of cultivating vital crops aims to mitigate opium production and diminish the country's reliance on illegal markets. However, it is essential to recognize the negative consequences as well.

For a period exceeding three decades, the regions that have the potential to benefit from the canal water have been either neglected or employed for the cultivation of opium poppies, with a particular

emphasis on the provinces located in the southern region. The process of modifying land for the purpose of cultivating plants requires significant resources, including time, work, and financial investments. The project is being undertaken by the National Development Company of Afghanistan, using cash derived from public sources, during a time of economic instability within the nation. The projected cost of the canal project amounts to around \$684 million. More than 20 million persons in the country are in need of humanitarian assistance and financial resources in order to sustain stability in the face of disease, malnutrition, and death. As of the calendar year 2022, a cumulative sum of \$321 million has been obtained.

The apprehensions over the probable collapse of the dam were mostly based on uncertainties surrounding its design and construction. The absence of specialized knowledge has resulted in the establishment of a substantial excavation project aimed at collecting water from the river to facilitate the irrigation of agricultural regions. The occurrence of any probable faults during the building of the canal would nullify all prior efforts, perhaps resulting in substantial ramifications for the water supply of adjacent states. Moreover, the existence of this issue exacerbates the importance of water shortage in Central Asia.

Search of Consensus

The construction of the Kush Tepa Canal by the Taliban presents a significant challenge to the national interests of Central Asian nations. As previously stated, the construction of the canal in Uzbekistan poses several challenges for the nation. The main concern is the projected decrease of around 15% in the water flow of the Amu Darya River. As a result, it is expected that Surkhandarya, Khorezm, Kashkadarya, Bukhara, Navoi, and the Republic of Karakalpakstan may experience substantial water scarcity, resulting in adverse conditions. The Amu Darya River experiences a yearly reduction in water volume of 34 cubic kilometers. Given Uzbekistan's heavy reliance on this river for its water supply, this trend raises concerns

about the possible appearance of a substantial water shortage problem. The water-related issues faced by Uzbekistan are inherently interconnected with the country's strategic objectives and, as a result, possess geopolitical importance.

Post Scriptum

At now, the government of Uzbekistan is actively involved in diplomatic discussions and engaged in communication with representatives of the Taliban in order to resolve pertinent problems. One possible strategy to mitigate the growing apprehensions around this project may be extending an invitation to the Taliban leadership to engage in regional development endeavors, therefore fostering an equitable allocation of Amu Darya waters. The commencement of a dialogue with the relevant stakeholders is contingent upon the continuing deliberations around the Trans-Afghan Railway Corridor in Uzbekistan. Discussions of this kind have the potential to serve as a vital resource in the peaceful resolution of water-related issues.

We may say that the first and only effective strategy for modern Afghanistan against the further deepening of the crisis in such conditions could be a constructive dialogue with neighboring countries in the most sensitive aspects of the regional agenda and search for an optimum to tackle the hard-humanitarian situation there. The current reality in Afghanistan will remain an important vector of regional geopolitics in the foreseeable future and will continue to influence the balance of international and political forces in the world as a whole.

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