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AFGHANISTAN'S PATH TO RECOVERY: CENTRAL ASIAN DIMENSION

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Abstract: This paper closely looks at the current state of affairs in Afghanistan and its relations with countries of Central Asia. It also highlights little progress made by national Afghan government since 2014 after NATO withdrawal. Such issues as border security, regional cooperation, international community's development assistance are discussed. Most importantly paper attempts to answer whether there is indeed imminent threat emanating from Afghanistan to its neighbours in the North. It is getting increasingly clear today that United States is failing to succeed in Afghanistan yet again. Failure is happening across many various dimensions: political, military, social, economic and regional. Today Afghanistan is widely perceived as a war-torn country with continuous fighting and a little prospect for the peace. One can say that Afghanistan truly became a platform for clash of civilisations with Western powers trying to create liberal democracy against deeply traditional, rural and tribalistic society the country presents. In this context, it is hard to imagine how the path to comprehensive recovery should look like.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Central Asia, Taliban, foreign fighters, regional security, Islamic State Khorasan, NATO

Аңдатпа: Бұл құжат Ауғанстандағы қазіргі жағдайды және оның Орталық Азия елдерімен қарым-қатынасын сипаттайды. Мақалада сондай-ақ Ауғанстан ұлттық үкіметінің НАТО ұйымына мүше елдердің контингенттері шығарылғаннан кейін 2014 жылдан бастап біршама ілгерілеу туралы айтылған. Шекара қауіпсіздігі, аймақтық ынтымақтасты және халықаралық қоғамдастықтың дамуына көмек сияқты мәселелер талқылануда. Ең маңызды мақала Ауғанстанның аймақтық көршілері үшін, сондай-ақ алыс көршілер үшін шынымен де туындайтын қауіп бар ма деген сұраққа жауап беруге тырысады. Бүгінгі таңда АҚШ Ауғанстанда қайтадан жетістікке жете алмағаны айқындала түсуде. Сәтсіздіктер әртүрлі деңгейлерде болады: саяси, әскери, әлеуметтік, экономикалық және аймақтық. Бүгінгі таңда Ауғанстанды үздіксіз соғыстарға ұшыраған ел ретінде және қазіргі кездегі басты проблемалардың бірі ретінде қабылдайды. Ұзақ уақытқа созылатын бейбітшіліктің болашағы әрдайым мүмкін емес сияқты. Ауғанстан шынымен де батыстық державалармен өркениеттер қатығысы үшін нақты алаңға айналды деп айтуға болады, бұл елдің терең дәстүрлі, ауылдық және рулық қоғамына қарсы либералды демократия құруға тырысады. Осыған орай Ауғанстанды жан-жақты қайта құрудың жолы қандай болуы керек екенін елестету қиын.

Түйін сөздер: Ауғанстан, Орталық Азия, Талибан, шетелдік күрескерлер, аумақтық қауіпсіздік, Хорасан Ислам мемлекеті, НАТО.

Аннотация: В этом документе подробно рассматриваются текущее состояние дел в Афганистане и его отношения со странами Центральной Азии. Статья также подчеркивает незначительный прогресс, достигнутый национальным правительством Афганистана начиная с 2014 года после вывода контингентов стран-членов НАТО. Обсуждаются такие вопросы, как безопасность границ, региональное сотрудничество, помощь международного сообщества в развитии. Самое главное статья пытается ответить на вопрос, существует ли действительно неизбежная угроза, исходящая из Афганистана для его региональных соседей. Сегодня становится все более очевидным, что Соединенным Штатам вновь не удастся добиться успеха в Афганистане. Неудачи происходят на уровне многих различных измерений: политическом, военном, социальном, экономическом и региональном. Сегодня Афганистан широко воспринимается как раздираемая войной страна с непрерывными войнами. Перспектива установления прочного мира кажется зыбкой и маловероятной. Можно сказать, что Афганистан действительно стал платформой для столкновения цивилизаций с западными державами, пытающимися создать либеральную демократию против глубоко традиционного, сельского и племенного общества, которое представляет собой страна. В этом контексте трудно представить, как должен выглядеть путь к комплексному восстановлению Афганистана.

Ключевые слова: Афганистан, Центральная Азия, Талибан, иностранные бойцы, региональная безопасность, Исламская Республика Хорасан, НАТО

Introduction

It is getting increasingly clear today that United States are failing to succeed in Afghanistan yet again. Failure is happening across many various dimensions: political, military, social, economic and regional. The idea of Greater Central Asia with Afghanistan included failed to find its real representation amongst its neighbours. If nothing, all five Central Asian countries regard Afghanistan with caution, sometimes even bordering with suspicion and heavy security concerns.

Today Afghanistan is widely perceived as a war-torn country with continuous fighting and a little prospect for the peace. Taliban, it seems, is as strong as ever and twice as confident to attack Afghanistan's Northern provinces, not far away from the border with Central Asian republics.

At the same time the EU as well as the US is making attempts to bind Afghanistan to regional cooperation and integration via different projects, such as CASA-1000, TAPI and the Chabahar port construction. It is expected that both Central Asia and South Asia, two regions that are sandwiching Afghanistan from both sides would also join the reconstruction efforts in order to assist their most turbulent neighbour. It is worth mentioning that so far none of the projects are fully functional.

Moreover the security situation in the country is too dire to describe: authorities today are facing not only reinforced Taliban, but also few thousand Daesh/ISIS forces alongside the remnants of Al Qaeda scattered all across the country. Despite the presence of NATO's Resolute Support Mission their numbers are too small to seriously contribute into establishing solid security nation-wide. For example almost immediately after NATO's International Security Assistance Force withdrawal at the end of 2014, Taliban managed to gain control over one fifth of Afghanistan's territory. (Guistoizzi)

Major threat for Central Asian countries is presented by ISIS branch located in Afghanistan. Islamic State Khorasan or IS-K is even more dangerous than militant groupings currently left in Syria and Iraq, as it is much closer to home. And it is no secret that among IS-K fighters there are Central Asian nationals who after the defeat of ISIS in the Middle East were directed back to their home countries. Among Central Asians who fought alongside IS in the Middle East, most were killed, captured, or detained. Tiny portion of them returned back to their countries of origin, where under specific terms and conditions some were pardoned and integrated back to society. Others fled to the most

convenient, geographically close and affordable place: Afghanistan. There they joined back into ranks of Afghan branch of ISIS – IS-K.

It is well known today that infamous Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, whose initial goal was to overthrow the secular regime of Uzbekistan's first President Islam Karimov, pledged their allegiance and joined IS-K.

Currently there is an ongoing debate among regional and international experts as to whether Central Asian governments should expect any Islamist incursion from Afghanistan. Both Taliban and IS-K are strengthening their positions in the country, as can be seen from regular Taliban attacks within Northern Provinces where Afghanistan borders with three Central Asian republics: Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Border skirmishes became regular and intensive. (Ibrahimi & Shahram)

For example on 3 November, 2016 Afghan National Forces and the US conducted joint operation in Afghanistan's northern district of Kunduz with at least 30 civilians killed and 25 injured. The operation targeted Taliban leaders who planned additional attacks in Kunduz. Another purpose was to clear Taliban positions and disrupt the organization's operations in Kunduz. Operation was widely reported in the media due to severe human losses: two US Special forces members killed and two more injured; four members of Afghan special forces killed and six more injured. From the Taliban side 28 insurgents were killed and 10 others wounded including a top commander. (Najim Rahim and Rod Nordland)

There were also unofficial reports that local residents were caught up during the fight that claimed civilian lives, mostly women and children. The fact is that in most cases Taliban infiltrates residential areas and starts using civilians as human shields, thus multiplying the casualties of peaceful population.

After the emergence of Islamic State in the Middle East, Central Asia was proclaimed as intrinsic part of Islamic Caliphate under the name of Khorasan Province. At present the gravest concern is the idea that after failing to establish full-fledged Islamic Caliphate in the Middle East, IS leaders plan to create its version on the territories of Central Asian states.

Information about the fact that Central Asian extremists were assigned with orders to go back to their home countries and launch disruptive terrorist activities against secular regimes of the region has right to exist. (Менджкович)

Some of these former soldiers of Jihad try to integrate back to society and go legal; some of them

might even appear to repent their actions; and some of them form “sleeping cells” to strike when least expected and strike hard.

One of the United Nations latest documents clearly explains that along with Taliban, Al-Qaeda and its affiliated Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement maintain significant presence in Afghanistan’s Badakhshan Province that borders Tajikistan. Worse, according to the same document over 500 fighters from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are operating under Taliban in that Province. (UNSC document)

This facts suggest that there are hidden channels functioning between these three CA countries, Afghanistan and perhaps Middle East that facilitate communications, movement of the extremists and possible funding. However the fact that nationals from CA countries are present within the ranks of Taliban does not necessarily mean a planned incursion into Central Asia. Taliban itself time and again stressed that their main objectives are primarily to do with Afghanistan’s internal affairs and that they do not intend to cross the borders.

At the same time Taliban and IS-K are two different forces with different strategic objectives, who also regularly clash with each other. (Seldin)

IS-K holds few training camps in Afghanistan where predominantly foreign fighters with Syrian background train the new recruits. Tajik law enforcement official went as far as stating that there are over 6000 foreign fighters and over 30 training camps functioning in the Northern Provinces of Afghanistan belonging to IS-K, Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement and Jamaat Ansarullah. (Менджкович)

The question to be asked is how credible this information might be about Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement being run and funded by militant Uighurs who fight against China? (Colin and Rexton Kan) Do all these groups share common goals or are they forced to stay together as there is one common enemy? Taliban fights both official government in Kabul and any foreign presence, both military and civilian. It is also reported that Taliban is waging war against IS-K due to different visions of the future of the country along with different objectives. So far it is rather explicit that Taliban is fighting virtually everyone including its own government.

At the same time Taliban’s single official office abroad in Qatar and its representatives are circling between great powers (US, Russia, Iran, etc) in an attempt to strike a deal. Can it be that Taliban is hopelessly split within itself and its different factions determine to achieve different set of goals?

It has been long known that among Taliban’s various factions there are moderate, peaceful wings who plan to settle the conflict and want to establish peace in the country.

Currently Taliban is actively engaging in negotiations with both Moscow and Tashkent attempting to get both political and diplomatic support from two capitals. Both capitals insist on talks with Kabul as legitimate party to be involved. However the progress is stalled in terms of agreement with official Kabul.

Both sides are claiming unattainable goals. For Taliban it is complete withdrawal of all foreign troops; release of prisoners and adoption of new Constitution based on Sharia law. President Ashraf Ghani well understands that accepting these demands equals the suicide of his regime. Without advanced foreign troops, their training, assistance and particularly funding entire country might end up at the mercy of the radicals. Kabul would lose its political credibility in front of the West and NATO by complying with Taliban. If Taliban wins it is very likely that Ghani would no longer be President and entire government will change. If the country would adopt new Constitution based on Sharia law, there will be no space for building a democracy that NATO powers struggled to achieve for 18 years.

No one at this stage can provide a guarantee that total removal of the foreign presence from the country might bring everlasting peace should the government comply with Taliban demands. On the other hand, one can argue that poor peace is better than current state of affairs with constant Taliban attacks and massive casualties of both civilians and the military.

International community’s attempts to assist

Both United States and international community have over the years been heavily investing and supporting Afghan economy in order to construct a viable state. Numerous conferences were held to attract more international donors.

For example on 4 and 5 October 2016 Brussels hosted an international conference to promote financial aid to Afghanistan until 2020. It was attended by over 70 countries and 30 international organizations and agencies. (Semple) In 2012 at the similar conference in Tokyo over 70 donors pledged to provide 16 billion US dollars. In 2016 in Brussels, Kabul was promised 15.2 billion US dollars until 2020 if Afghan authorities adhere to a number of specific terms and conditions, like following the provisions of the Self-Reliance through Mutual

Accountability Framework (SMAF) adopted in 2015. (Semple)

At the NATO Summit in Warsaw in 2016 member countries agreed to provide security assistance of roughly 1 billion US dollars per year until 2020.

It remains painfully obvious that international community cannot continue observing Afghanistan further destabilising itself after almost two decades of exacerbating military engagement. Providing financial support was deemed crucial to bring about a new strategic shift towards stabilization and peace. However the results of this policy appear to be almost non-existent.

Still European Union acknowledged small scale of progress in terms of human development, like improved rights of women, anti-corruption measures and revenue collection. Nevertheless the country remains largely fragile entity facing numerous political, security and economic challenges.

The gravest and strongest of those challenges is undoubtedly a corruption that stretches across the entire society, governmental institutions and various structures in charge of running the country. The corruption can be fully considered as an inherent part of social and political life of Afghanistan, deeply embedded into the mindset of people. It is a threat no foreign government or any other external force is equipped to fight and win. It is partially due to corruption than anything else that contribute to disrupting national security forces, including ANA and ANSF. It serves as deterrent factor to investments, economic growth and prosperity.

In 2015 Transparency International ranked Afghanistan as number 166 out of 167 countries in its Corruption Perceptions Index. Kabul's response was to adopt new Anti-corruption strategy and the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre. The results of these measures remains to be seen. (Semple)

The overarching goal international community struggles to achieve is to make Afghanistan a self-sufficient country with the solid and healthy rule of law, strong adherence to the human rights and institutional capabilities to deliver quality services to Afghan population. Following the idea of NATO member states who sent national military contingents to Afghanistan, suffered casualties and donated millions of euro/dollars, the country ought to obtain at least a tiny resemblance to the liberal democracy: a vision which would probably never come true.

The World Bank estimated that Afghanistan had to stay connected to foreign assistance lifeline up until 2030 and perhaps even beyond that mark. Country's economy is lagging behind significantly with the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business

in Afghanistan Report ranking it 177 out of 189 economies in 2016. (UNSC document)

However, there are chances and opportunities for Afghanistan to rise and prosper. Interest towards natural resources of Afghanistan were demonstrated by China Metallurgical Group Corporation and the Jiangxi Copper Company Limited concerning Mes Aynak copper mine. (Mohsin Amin)

Country is also blessed with plenty of water resources which it can use to bargain with its immediate neighbours in the region.

If anything, Kabul well understands that it would most likely need reliable partners and donors to continue funding and most importantly to deliver the promised aid. However the aid is steadily dwindling and it is high time for Afghanistan's leadership to grasp that they too must work towards progress and implement the required reforms.

Central Asian neighbourhood: for better or worse

One can say that Kazakhstan being located further from Afghanistan than its other neighbours is less impacted in terms of security dimension. However, as part of Central Asia and being tied to other CA countries by more than just borders, Kazakhstan is as much concerned about Afghanistan's future as its immediate neighbours. There are strong political, economic, social, cultural and humanitarian ties that connect Kabul and Nur-Sultan nowadays. (Сафранчук)

Russia as regional power having significant influence over Central Asian politics, is currently involved in the dialogue with both official Kabul and Taliban. Ensuring safety and stability at the southern borders of Central Asian Republics has always been one of Moscow's top priorities. Moscow is mostly applying political and diplomatic tools by organising conferences and negotiations related to Afghanistan. (Сафранчук)

Fully comprehending the wide range of regional threats and challenges Russia is busy trying to beef up both border and general security of three CA countries: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. With Tajikistan Russia conducted joint military exercises in July 2018 in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (News.tj) There are also ongoing talks and discussions about opening of the second base in Kyrgyzstan. (Stratfor) And 201 division based in Tajikistan is stepping up its general security measures as well as paying close attention towards Tajik-Afghan border.

The other interesting fact is that border clashes between Afghanistan and Central Asian states occur primarily at the Tajik-Afghan border. This can be explained mostly due to increasing drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Since Taliban's fall in 2001 drug production as well as drug trafficking became lucrative business and almost the single source of funding for the movement. (Jones)

The clashes at the Tajik-Afghan border as mentioned earlier happen because it is major drug trafficking route. There are warlords and organised crime structures on both sides of the border that control it. It is them who set the rules and break them. Local warlords share conflict of interest concerning either territory or volumes. There might be other reasons involved too, like the difference between the value of the currencies: Tajik somoni and Afghan afghani. Also religious preferences matter: Tajiks have Shia Muslim minorities, while Afghanistan consists of mainly Sunni Muslims.

With NATO closing its Liaison Office for Central Asia in Tashkent in March 2017, the level of interest had significantly dropped. The office has been functioning since March 2013. NATO officials explained it was closed due to internal review of the Alliance's budget and other bureaucratic considerations. At the time there were speculations that it might somehow be politically motivated. Starting from April 1, 2017 communication between Central Asian governments and NATO is conducted directly from Brussels.

The office in Tashkent has been acting as NATO's fully accredited diplomatic mission facilitating NATO's relationship with Central Asian Republics in such areas as defence planning and review, defence education and training, civil emergency planning, public diplomacy, cooperation on science and environmental issues and others. The office used to coordinate NATO activities throughout the entire region. However NATO worked with each country bilaterally, offering tailor-made programs and projects concerning modernization of the army, operational planning, medical issues and participation in the United Nations peacekeeping operations and other. (Jones)

One of the key issue on NATO agenda towards Central Asia is to engage all five Republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) in the process of Afghanistan's future development where the Alliance still maintains its limited presence. Opened in 2013 the office was tasked with coordination of the alliance's activities in the region, including the logistics in regards to Northern Distribution Network, a reverse

transit route designated to withdraw the military equipment, armaments and other combat related material from Afghanistan. (UNSC document)

Today NATO runs Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan: it is a non-combat mission designed to provide training, advice and assistance to the Afghan National Army, its security forces, institutions and the police. (Seldin)

US military's main task after NATO withdrawal remains to train, advise and assist Afghan National Army and Police which in 2015 succeeded NATO's role in preserving peace in the country. That year alone these forces suffered severe casualties: roughly 5,000 were killed and another 15,000 wounded. (Jones)

It quickly became clear that NATO trained Afghan national army (ANA) and Afghan national security forces (ANSF) are struggling badly against Taliban's offensive. In most cases they failed to win back the territories fallen under Taliban control.

It is estimated that beginning from January 1 until August 19 in 2016 already 5,523 Afghan police and troops have been killed all over the country (Simple)

At regular intervals Washington gets slight hints from its allies about possible new surge, however Washington is demonstrating procrastination in this issue. It is also possible that private military companies might get involved as was the case in Iraq and Syria. (Ibrahimi & Shahram)

Conclusion

Today Afghanistan remains predominantly agrarian, backward country with the focus upon shadow economy. Main Afghan export items being drugs and radical Islam ideas. It also has a lot to do with corruption, poor management, lack of the rule of law, ceaseless civil war and very little perspectives the country can offer to its young generation. One can say that Afghanistan truly became a platform for clash of civilisations with Western powers trying to create liberal democracy against deeply traditional, rural and tribalistic society Afghanistan really presents.

If indeed incursion might occur, Central Asia have two great powers to turn to: Russia and China both of which have high stakes within the region as well as political and economic interests. But this is the matter of separate and more detailed report. So far no serious evidence emerged about Taliban's plans to invade into the region, despite high level of scaremongering flowing from both the West and North.

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