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The Great Game 2.0: Central and South Asia



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The report of the US National Intelligence Council, Global Trends 2040, published on 7 April in Washington, contrasts strongly with the consolidated diverse peacekeeping initiatives in Afghanistan, broad efforts in this field by regional players (for example, Uzbekistan), and signs of a certain detente in Kashmir along

the disputed Indian-Pakistani border.¹ The document of over 150 pages is compiled every four years. In 2017, the 6th edition of the document prepared by the Obama Administration contained a warning of a pandemic and its devastating impact on the global economy. From the present day's point of view, the Global Trends of 2017 looks like an ominous prophecy. Both Afghanistan and Kashmir have long been a seething cauldron of systemic contradictions and conflicts. The document notes that during the next five years, India and Pakistan may stumble into a large-scale war neither side wants, especially following a terrorist attack that the Indian government judges to be significant.

The ability of some militant outfits to conduct cross-border attacks, New Delhi's resolve to retaliate against Islamabad after such an attack, and the willingness of Islamabad to respond in kind (which has been the case so far) are



likely to persist and may increase in the next five years. The authors warned that miscalculation by both governments could prompt a breakdown in the deterrence that has restricted conflict to levels each side judges it can manage. The report underlines that US actions in Afghanistan during the next year will have significant consequences across the region, particularly in Pakistan and India. This would be especially true, if a security vacuum emerges in Afghanistan that results in a civil war

¹ https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/GlobalTrends_2040.pdf

between the Taliban and its Afghan opponents, expanded freedom of maneuvers for regional terrorist networks, or criminals and refugees flowing out of the country.

Considering these forecasts and practical realities, attention should be drawn to Uzbekistan's diplomatic activity in South and Central Asia. On 29 December 2020, the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev



announced in his address to the Parliament about the country's foreign policy priorities for 2021. A fundamentally new aspect is the focus on southern direction. In particular, the development of cooperation with South Asia and promotion of peace in Afghanistan have been identified as priorities. The high-level International Conference, *Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity» announced by Mirziyoyev at the UNGA's 75th session should be the cornerstone event of such efforts. Challenges and opportunities*, to be held in Tashkent in July 2021. The organizers intend to provide an impetus to the comprehensive development of interregional cooperation, create a solid conceptual framework for closer interaction between the two regions and contribute specific strategic projects to the interregional agenda unleashing the enormous untapped potential of cooperation. Tashkent's vision of the settlement of the Afghan conflict and its impact on regional processes, including throughout the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) territory, was outlined in February by Eldor Aripov, Director of the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. In his opinion, the prospects for stable and sustainable development in



Central Asia are inextricably linked with the achievement of peace in Afghanistan. It is impossible to ensure the prosperity of the Central Asian region unless the Afghan conflict resolution is achieved. It was stressed that, for many centuries, Afghanistan had been an important link in the regional trade, cultural, scientific and intellectual exchange, playing the role of a connecting bridge for Central and South Asia. In this regard, peace in the country, also called the 'Heart of Asia', opens up unique strategic opportunities for the restoration and further development of interconnectedness between these subregions.

Harnessing Afghanistan's transit and infrastructure potential will provide the Central Asian countries with the shortest access to Pakistan's seaports, which would benefit not only Uzbekistan but also all the Central Asian republics, South Asian states and the monarchies of the Middle East. As stressed by Aripov, the strengthening of interconnectedness will facilitate the formation of favorable internal and external prerequisites for the development of interregional trade, cultural and scientific exchanges, and maintaining peace and stability throughout the vast areas of the two regions. In turn, Vladimir Norov, SCO Secretary-General, notes that the speedy settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan is a key factor in establishing stability in the SCO space. In his view, the political basis for the start of the Afghan peace process, was the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan in March 2018, and the initiatives of Mirziyoyev on the adoption of a plan for Afghanistan's socio-economic reconstruction within the framework of the SCO-Afghanistan contact group.

The growing role of the SCO, which represents all of Afghanistan's neighbours, in maintaining the intra-Afghan dialogue and involving it in regional relations has

been supported by Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Foreign Minister of Pakistan. He considered that the achievement of peace and stability in this country opens up new strategic opportunities for bringing the trans-regional interconnectedness between Central and South Asia to an unprecedented level.

Regional experts believe that it would be better to talk of the hidden opportunities in the context of the Afghan case once peace is achieved rather than of peace itself. Even relative stability



and peace in Afghanistan would contribute in economic term to strengthening cooperation between Central and South Asia, exploiting Afghanistan's potential of its strategic location and natural resources, expanding cultural and humanitarian relations, etc. The full implementation of the transport and infrastructure potential of peaceful Afghanistan would, in particular, reduce the time of transportation of goods from Uzbekistan to Pakistan from 35 to 3-5 days. Simultaneously, the export of Uzbek products could experience a threefold increase, from USD 100 mln to 300 mln. In this regard, the establishment of an early peace in Afghanistan is an ideal recipe for strengthening the interconnectedness among the countries of Central and South Asia. In this context, Uzbekistan's initiatives to build the trans-Afghan transport corridor, and other Afghanistan-related projects launched within the SCO framework are quite consistent and reasonable.

The plans to strengthen connectivity between Central and South Asia logically follow Tashkent's regional policy, through which it manifests itself as a driving force

for regional transformation. Uzbekistan is pragmatically striving to turn the challenges in Afghanistan into strategic opportunities for its development. However, it is clear that Uzbekistan's efforts alone are not enough.



The development of foreign policy priorities implies support (at least formal) for the entire Central Asian region. Therefore, Tashkent is stepping up diplomatic efforts to strengthen its role as a voice of all Central Asian states in the neighboring region. To meet this challenge, the Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov made a tour to Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, soliciting the Uzbekistan's neighbor's support. In addition to the bilateral agenda, the issue of developing economic ties with Afghanistan and South Asian countries has been discussed during the high-level talks.

For Tashkent, Nur-Sultan's encouragement of its plans is a matter of fundamental importance, given the hidden competition for regional leadership. To ensure a broader international consensus, the Uzbek authorities have already invited delegations from the United Nations (UN), SCO, Afghanistan, Iran, India, China, Pakistan, Russia, and other states to take part in the international conference scheduled for July. Obviously, in the context of the Afghan settlement, Uzbekistan will receive certain support from the United States, including the encouragement of its ambitions for the role of a regional leader. However, the United States Strategy for Central Asia adopted in 2020 focuses also on Kazakhstan. American strategists will also appeal to the Central Asia Investment Partnership created under the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC). This forum is, in fact, an



element of the C5+1 project (the countries of the region plus the United States). However, it ignores Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The declining US interest in the other three regional republics probably means that Washington focuses on the key vectors to achieve immediate benefits.

At the same time, it is worth recalling that the US concept of Greater Central Asia which later evolved into the idea of a single region of South and Central Asia and the New Silk Road project, centered around Afghanistan in order to strengthen the least integrated region of the world. Eventually, they failed. The endless war in Afghanistan and Washington's inability to achieve even relative security and stability at the peak of its military presence have nullified the implementation of priority transport and energy projects and significantly undermined the New Silk Road credibility. Therefore, peace in Afghanistan is vital the full-fledged interregional cooperation, not to mention a breakthrough in interregional ties. Early US initiatives did not stand the test of geopolitical realities.

In the last decade, the transport corridors have developed, bypassing Afghanistan, which is hardly surprising. One of them, North-South, was launched in November 2018 with Russian, Indian and Iranian participation. The route from Mumbai to St.Petersburg should pass through the Caspian Sea, but it is adjacent to the Central Asia's transport infrastructure and is suitable for the development of cooperation with India.

The 2011 Ashgabat Agreement among Iran, Oman, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan aims to implement a transport corridor project that can link Central and South Asia. In this aspect, Iran has played a major role. Another route bypassing Afghanistan runs through China. The Karakoram Highway connecting China and Pakistan is

considered a key transport route. In 2004, an agreement was signed on the construction of the Karachi – Kashgar – Bishkek – Almaty transport corridor, which has been in operation since 2008. In October



2017, a new transport corridor Tashkent – Andijan – Osh – Irkeshtam – Kashgar was opened, offering South Asia access. However, the bypass routes are longer, and this negates the main advantage of the southern vector. They deprive Central Asia of one of its major assets, the shortest possible route to the World Ocean, while the region itself is considered part of larger projects. For these reasons, none of the logistics plans resulted in strategic changes. Besides, the Trans-Iranian route connects Central Asia with India, and the Trans-Chinese route Pakistan.

Uzbekistan demonstrates persistency and pragmatism, despite the protracted Afghan conflict. Tashkent does not refuse to develop transport projects in the southern direction. The foundation is laid for the Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway project, which is designed to connect the South Asian railway system with the Central Asian and Eurasian branches and provides access to the Pakistani seaports (Karachi, Qasem and Gwadar).

The trans-Afghan railway construction project worth over USD four billion has been approved by Prime Minister Imran Khan and is scheduled to start in September 2021. In order to fully open South Asia and enter the market of India and South Asian states to the east of Pakistan, a more significant obstacle

beyond the Afghan factor must be cleared. The Indo-Pakistani conflict, is of a fundamental nature for both countries.

The Kashmir issue has led to a zero-sum game across the entire spectrum of bilateral relations, with regional and global implications. Pakistan and India deny each other transit through their territory. It is no coincidence, the transport corridors bypassing Afghanistan, connecting Central and South Asia, lead to only one of these states. The expansion of interregional relations in Central and South Asia, the realization of the immense potential of their complementary markets and transit capacity looks natural and logical.

However, they are stuck in the vortex of geopolitical turbulence and have become hostages of the Great Game 2.0. If we imagine that due to some fundamentally new approaches and solutions, the Afghan and Kashmir



conflicts are one day be resolved, the geopolitical landscape of Central and South Asia will be fundamentally reshaped. From this perspective, Uzbekistan's diplomatic efforts to bring the conflicting parties and other stakeholders to the same table in July and repeat 55 years later the success of the 1966 Tashkent Declaration merit every respect and deserve support. The Great Game 2.0 in Asia continues.