

The principle of President of Uzbekistan regarding the stabilization of Afghanistan - "from instability and destruction to peace and creation" - determines the logic of joint regional cooperation in the Afghan direction



The recent dynamic development of the situation in Afghanistan has attracted the attention of the entire international community. On the one hand, the ongoing peace talks in Qatar between the Afghan government and the Taliban may end the long-standing conflict and give rise to an era of peaceful and constructive development of the country. However, the sharp escalation of violence following the announcement of the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan in the coming months postpones the prospects for an early restoration of stability and promises the Afghan people, if not a new round of civil war, then at least even greater chaos and aggravation of the socio-economic crisis. The current situation has actualized the issue of finding ways to resolve the conflict as soon as possible by peaceful means.

In this regard, it is necessary to note the timeliness and exceptional significance of the expected start on July 15-16 of this year. in Tashkent, the international conference "Central and South Asia: regional interconnectedness. Challenges and Opportunities", initiated by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh.Mirziyoyev back in September 2020 during the 75th session of the UN General Assembly. The current dramatic development of events in the neighboring country has once again demonstrated the foresight and political acumen of our leader.

Over the past years, the head of Uzbekistan has invariably called on the international community to join efforts in promoting peace in Afghanistan, which for centuries has served as a link between Central and South Asia. The prospect of peace on Afghan soil will allow the peoples of this vast region to fully reap the dividends of the restored interconnectedness, giving a powerful impetus to trans-regional development.

Today, in efforts to pacify the neighboring country and restore its peaceful economy, Shavkat Mirziyoyev is supported by all Central Asian states without exception.

In particular, thanks to the formation of a completely new friendly political atmosphere in Central Asia, cooperation between the states of the region in advancing the process of a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan has acquired a consolidated and comprehensive character in recent years.

At the same time, the countries of the region initially advocated an exceptional political and diplomatic settlement of the Afghan crisis.

Thus, our countries are active participants in such international forums dedicated to the Afghan problem as the Kabul Process, the Moscow Format, the Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process forum, the International Contact Group on Afghanistan, the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, the Conference Regional Economic Cooperation for Afghanistan (RECKA).

Moreover, the Central Asian countries are forming additional dialogue platforms to facilitate the achievement of an early consensus on the establishment of peace on Afghan soil between the warring parties and the development of international approaches to a political resolution of the conflict.

In particular, on 27-28 March 2018, at the initiative of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the Tashkent International Conference on Afghanistan "Peace Process, Security Cooperation and Regional Interaction" was held. Representatives of 25 states and international organizations, including all Central Asian countries that took part in the event, unanimously adopted the Tashkent Declaration, a generally recognized program for building peace on Afghan soil. This strategic document at the regional and global levels consolidated the consensus on the need for an early start of direct negotiations between the government of Afghanistan and Taliban without preconditions, as well as the basic principles of a political settlement - the lack of alternatives and inclusiveness of the peace process, carried out under the leadership and efforts of the Afghans themselves, and readiness for mutual compromises. , respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan.

In January 2018, within the framework of Kazakhstan's chairmanship in the UN Security Council, a meeting was held "Formation of regional partnership in Afghanistan and Central Asia as a model of work in the direction that brings together security and development issues." At the event, the members of the Security Council declared their full support for Afghanistan's efforts to achieve peace and reconciliation, incl. on the basis of cooperation with the states of Central Asia. At the same time, in continuation of efforts to promote peace in Afghanistan, in September 2018, Nur-Sultan hosted the first regional conference "Empowering Women in Afghanistan".

In turn, Turkmenistan in November 2017 successfully held the 7th Conference of Regional Economic Cooperation on Afghanistan (RECCA VII), and Kyrgyzstan initiated the creation of the International Center for Afghan Studies in Bishkek.

In March of this year, a regular meeting of the conference "Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process" was held in Tajikistan, following which high-ranking diplomats from 14 countries of the region, including of all Central Asian countries, published a joint declaration in support of advancing the peace process and continuing regional and global efforts to achieve peace in Afghanistan.

Along with this, our countries show an exemplary example of constructive interaction in the Afghan direction. A completely new in importance and significance for the life of the region, the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia clearly demonstrates the determination of our countries to take joint actions to achieve economic development and prosperity through the stabilization of neighboring Afghanistan. Following the second meeting of Central Asian leaders in November 2019 in Tashkent, the Central Asian countries outlined a common position on the need to adhere to the key principles of a peaceful settlement - renunciation of violence, ceasefire, demonstration of readiness for

dialogue and compromise. At the same time, the heads of state expressed their firm intention to continue "comprehensive efforts to involve Afghanistan in regional trade, economic and infrastructure projects" in order to help establish a lasting peace on Afghan soil.

It is also worth mentioning that, on the eve of the second Consultative Meeting, the leaders of the Central Asian countries at the SCO summit in June 2019 in Bishkek unanimously supported the adoption of the "Roadmap" of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, which expresses the commonality of incl. states of Central Asia, on the Afghan peace settlement in the area of the Organization.

In parallel, the countries of Central Asia continue to effectively advance the agenda for an early resolution of the Afghan conflict through the involvement of Afghanistan in the multilateral dialogue mechanisms operating in the region. In particular, with the assistance 5 states of the Afghanistan region joined the work of the "India - Central Asia" format, launched in January 2019 in Samarkand.

And in May 2020, the first meeting of the "EU-CA-IRA" was held in the format of a videoconference, in December 2020 - "China-CA-IRA".

It should be noted that on 7 July on the initiative of the UN Center for Preventive Diplomacy, online talks were held between the foreign ministers of the countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan.

During the meeting, the parties stressed the importance of consolidating regional efforts to peacefully resolve the Afghan crisis, restore the country's economy, and adhere to the principle of the leading role of Afghans in the development of the process of intra-Afghan reconciliation. This once again confirms the common commitment of the Central Asian states to establish a lasting peace in Afghanistan through a political resolution of the conflict.

At the same time, our countries, actively promoting a political and diplomatic settlement of the Afghan crisis, proceed from the understanding that it is impossible to achieve a full and lasting peace in Afghanistan without reviving its peaceful economy, without demonstrating the benefits of peaceful development.

Indeed, in order to extinguish the fire of war, it is necessary not only to negotiate between the opposing sides, but also to create jobs, to ensure the development of the country's economy, so that people can find their earnings not in war, but in peaceful life.

The principle voiced by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev regarding the stabilization of Afghanistan - "from instability and destruction to peace and creation" - is fully supported by our neighbors and determines the logic of joint regional cooperation in the socio-economic restoration of Afghanistan.

According to the director of the Center for Afghan Studies at the University of Nebraska Sh.Ahmadzai, the initiatives of the head of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev regarding Afghanistan, aimed at actively involving Kabul in regional integration processes and turning the country into an indivisible part of the Central Asian region, acquire special significance and are fully supported by the world community.

Cooperation of the Central Asian states towards the social and economic revival of Afghanistan is carried out in the following key areas.

Trade. The share of Central Asian countries in Afghanistan's foreign trade turnover today is about 25%, or about US\$2 billion.

It is important to mention that the range of goods exported from our countries to Afghanistan includes critical products to ensure the smooth operation of many Afghan enterprises and maintain social stability in the country. Among them are chemical fertilizers, wheat flour, food products, energy carriers and oil products, mechanical engineering products, electrical engineering, light industry, services, etc.

At the same time, to stimulate the development of border trade on the Tajik-Afghan border, 4 shopping

centers, 4 free economic zones, a number of markets have been created, an international logistics center "Termez-Cargo" has been launched on the Uzbek-Afghan border, the FEZ "Termez" has already begun, work has already begun to create free trade zone "International Trade Center Termez", where, using modern technologies, services are organized for receiving, storing, processing, sorting and packaging products, as well as e-commerce portals. Moreover, trading houses of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan operate in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif.

Energy. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan today are reliable sources of electricity for Afghanistan. An acute shortage of electricity due to insufficient domestic production capacity hinders both social and economic development of Afghanistan.

According to some estimates, our countries annually supply more than 4 billion kWh to the neighboring state. or cover over 70% of Afghanistan's electricity needs.

Thus, since 2002, the volume of supplies from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan has increased from 62 million kW / h to 2.6 billion kW / h, that is, more than 40 times. In turn, the volume of electricity exported to this country from Tajikistan is over 1.2 billion kWh, from Turkmenistan - over 700 million kWh.

Thanks to the efforts of the Central Asian countries in the direction of Afghanistan from Central Asia, about 10 power lines have been successfully launched.

At the same time, there are specific plans and solid contracts to expand mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of electricity that is so necessary for the neighboring state.

In particular, a project for the construction of the Surkhan-Puli-Khumri power transmission line worth 110 million dollars is being implemented, which will increase the export of Uzbek electricity to Afghanistan by 70% to 6 billion kW. h annually and connect Afghanistan to the unified energy system of Central Asia. In August of this year. an agreement was signed between the National Electricity Networks of Uzbekistan JSC and the Afghan company Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS) on the supply of electricity to Afghanistan for a period of 10 years.

It is noteworthy that in the future this project will become an organic part of another large-scale regional initiative in the field of electricity - "CASA-1000" - which stipulates the annual supply of more than 5 kWh of electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan. For transit, the Afghan side will receive up to US\$50 million every year.

Also, Tajikistan, in the future, plans to significantly increase the supply of electricity to neighboring Afghanistan through the construction of high-voltage transmission lines. According to the Tajik media, construction of a 500-kilovolt power transmission line from the Rogun hydroelectric station to the Sangtuda converter substation will begin this year.

In turn, since 2018, the Turkmen side, together with the government of Afghanistan and Pakistan, has been working on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) power transmission line project with a throughput capacity of 300 megawatts to Herat and Kandahar (600 megawatts in total) with the prospect of increasing to 1,000 megawatt.

In parallel, Ashgabat is building the TAPI megaproject worth US\$7-10 billion to supply 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas to South Asia through Afghan territory. m per year.

Transport. In restoring economic stability and security, as well as the full-fledged reunification of Afghanistan with Central Asia, the countries of the region pay special attention to strengthening transport connectivity and "freeing" the transit potential of the Afghan territory. At present, the railway routes Termez - Hairaton - Mazar-i-Sharif, 75 km long, and Atamurat - Imamnazar - Akina - Andkhoy, with a length of 118 km, have been laid from Central Asia to Afghanistan.

Not far over the horizon, and the implementation of a trans-regional megaproject beneficial to all parties -

the Mazar-i-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar railway - already named by experts as the project of the century. To date, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan have formed a firm consensus and developed an Action Plan ("Road Map") for the construction of the road.

The prospects for the road's economic benefits are enormous. For example, the railway branch will provide our countries with direct access to the Pakistani ports of Karachi and Gwadar, open a completely new path to promising markets in South Asia, reduce the time of delivery of goods from Central Asia to South Africa from 35 to 5 days, and reduce transport costs by 3 times.

At the same time, the implementation of the project will open the door for Afghanistan to a world of opportunity. In addition to multi-million dollar revenues from the transit of cargo and goods, the project will bring with it a "wave of infrastructure and industrial development" along the trajectory of the railway corridor. Conditions will be formed for the development of rich mineral reserves, the implementation of other regional projects, and the formation of an economic corridor with an advanced industrial infrastructure. And these are additional jobs, alternative sources of income for the population and, as a result, the elimination of the social motives of the conflict.

In turn, the construction of the new Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat railway will make a significant contribution to the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan.

At the same time, Turkmenistan plans to extend the Akina-Andkhoy railway line to the border with Tajikistan with further access to the states of the Asia-Pacific region and build a new line Serkhetabad - Torgundi - Herat, the length of which will be 173 kilometers. According to Turkmen experts, the implementation of these highways will create additional opportunities for the development of interstate trade and economic relations, including by connecting to the Lazurite Corridor (Afghanistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey) transport corridor, which was launched back in 2018.

Undoubtedly, these projects will harmoniously complement each other, expanding the network of logistics routes in the space not only in Central Asia, but throughout Eurasia. At the same time, they all serve to transform Afghanistan into an important transit and energy hub, which will create additional interest for all intra-Afghan forces in reaching political consensus and serve as a solid socio-economic basis for the peace process.

On the other hand, it will also increase the interest of regional states in maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan as a key condition for the implementation of trans-regional projects.

Cultural and humanitarian interaction. Perhaps, this sphere most clearly demonstrates the truly friendly, fraternal attitude of the Central Asian countries towards Afghanistan. For many years, we have been working together shoulder to shoulder to cope with the consequences of the humanitarian crisis in the neighboring country. Only during the coronavirus pandemic, which struck the whole world and pushed many countries to "national egoism", the Central Asian states sent humanitarian aid to Afghanistan in the form of food, medical equipment, medicines at least 12 times.

Our countries also provide significant support in the formation of a new intellectual elite in Afghanistan, which will contribute to the peaceful development of the country and the building of a stable society.

Today, Afghan youth have the opportunity to study in 17 areas of higher and 16 - secondary specialized, vocational education in the Educational Center in Termez, created at the initiative of President Mirziyoyev in 2018. To date, 136 Afghan students have completed their studies at the center, of which 96 received bachelor's degrees in the direction of "Uzbek language and literature", 40 took short-term courses in the Russian language, and also learned the skills of agriculture and entrepreneurship.

Since September 2019, 172 students are studying at the Educational Center in the areas of "Uzbek Language and Literature", "Obstetrics and Nursing", "Ground Transport Systems and Their Operation", of which 46 are girls.

Moreover, in July 2020, Tashkent, with the assistance of the EU and UNDP, launched an initiative aimed at supporting and empowering Afghan women by providing educational grants to study in Uzbekistan.

As a result of the implementation by Kazakhstan of an educational program for US\$50 million since 2010, more than 1,000 Afghans have received higher education in Kazakh universities. At the same time, schools were built in the Samangan provinces with the money of Nur-Sultan.

More than 500 Afghan students study in colleges and higher educational institutions of Tajikistan, mainly in medical, engineering and agricultural faculties. The practice of training scientists from Afghanistan at the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tatarstan has also been established.

About 200 Afghan students study at universities and institutes of Turkmenistan. accommodation and study expenses are fully covered by the Turkmen government, which also provides scholarships to them. In addition, a school was built in the Balkh province at the expense of Turkmenistan.

In turn, in June 2010 in Kyrgyzstan, with the support of the OSCE Center in Bishkek, training courses for Afghan customs officials were launched, which also has a positive impact on strengthening security in Central and South Asia.

As you know, the Afghan territory still remains a source of challenges and threats for neighboring countries, incl. northern, which act as a kind of barrier against the spread of terrorism, drug trafficking, arms smuggling for the international community.

The UN believes that over the years of the global struggle against the threat of terrorism, the Central Asian countries have shown an example of successful cooperation, in particular in the joint implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy at the regional level.

To date, all 5 Central Asian countries have completed the second phase of the Joint Action Plan for the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted in 2011. According to the Secretary General of the Organization A. Guterres, "regional cooperation in Central Asia opens up great opportunities for solving common problems, including those related to the fight against terrorism, strengthening border security, promoting dialogue with religious leaders and institutions, combating human trafficking and drug smuggling."

The general fight against drug trafficking in the region is carried out within the framework of the Anti-Drug Strategy Program of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states for 2018-2023 adopted at the summit of the heads of state of the SCO member states in June 2019 in Bishkek.

In addition, the Central Asian countries have also established a direct security dialogue with the Afghan government.

In this regard, such mechanisms of bilateral interaction with Afghanistan as the Turkmen-Afghan Commission on Security Cooperation, the Uzbek-Afghan Joint Commission on Security Issues, and the Tajik-Afghan Commission on Security Cooperation and border protection.

It should also be noted that Kazakhstan and Afghanistan signed an agreement on military cooperation, providing for "joint military exercises, cooperation in the medical field, training of military personnel, material and technical support, as well as interaction between the intelligence services of the two countries."

Summing up the thought, today the Central Asian states are active advocates for the establishment of peace and prosperity on Afghan soil. All 5 countries are promoting peaceful rhetoric and pursuing a policy of appeasement towards Afghanistan based on consolidated approaches and positions enshrined in the most important documents of a regional and international scale.

At the same time, in our opinion, the multifaceted intensive cooperation of the Central Asian partners

could be brought to the next level due to the intensification of joint promotion of projects for the socio-economic reconstruction of Afghanistan, and also expanded due to the recently emerging issues in the Afghan direction. The development of a unified approach towards Afghan refugees, assistance in mitigating the consequences of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, countering the threats of a possible increase in drug trafficking and the spread of extremism and terrorism in the region after the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan can be included in the future agenda of regional cooperation in the Afghan direction.

In this regard, the international high-level conference “Central and South Asia: regional interconnectedness. Challenges and Opportunities” will provide the international community with the opportunity to work out concrete solutions to assist the Afghan parties to reach mutual understanding and ensure the stability of peace in Afghanistan, as well as the Central Asian countries to discuss the prospects for expanding joint regional cooperation in the stabilization and peaceful development of the Afghan land.

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