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## US withdrawal from Afghanistan: new ‘old’ perspectives from Central Asia

Paper covers the Deal signed on 29 February 2020 in Doha between the United States and Taliban on stopping the violence and major terms and conditions the deal entails. Central Asian and Russian perspectives are taken into account as well as detailed views from both Taliban and Washington. Immediately after the deal a new wave of violence broke out in Afghanistan between Taliban and official Afghan national forces and the army. Paper attempts to answer how exactly the deal might benefit the countries of Central Asia and contribute to the overall regional security. One of the goals is to identify the real meaning of the Deal between US and Taliban for Central Asian countries. Among the tasks of the papers are following: make an attempt to find out whether Taliban truly intends to fulfill its end of the bargain; to comprehend the extent of the relationship between Taliban and other terrorist organisations operating inside the country; to reveal turbulent relations between official Afghan government and Washington and how these impact upon the Deal. The results of this article are about the uncertain future of Central Asia as a region facing post-signing the Deal. Despite ongoing violence and terrorist attacks in the country, Taliban’s key objective is to capture the power back; whilst Islamic State plans to extend its influence across entire neighbourhood, including CA.

*Keywords:* Afghanistan, Taliban, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Islamic State, United States, Ghani, peace settlement.

### *Introduction*

On 29 February 2020 United States and Taliban signed a historic deal aimed at completing the war in Afghanistan: almost 20 years after Washington toppled the same regime in its pursuit of the Global war on terrorism. US agreed to gradual withdrawal of their troops which would leave Afghanistan exposed yet again to multiple threats and challenges [1].

So far the implementation of the deal is yet to be seen. However the most difficult task lies ahead: to sort out things between Taliban and Afghan government directly. Washington had clearly shown that it no longer plans to interfere into domestic Afghan affairs and that whatever is about to happen will involve only two parties. Is it premature decision from US standpoint? What exactly Washington plans to achieve by leaving Afghanistan at this stage? How far Taliban might be willing to go to keep its commitments? What about other players within the country who have yet to say their word, mainly Islamic State and other terrorist organisations? And finally, how might the deal generally affect regional security of Central Asia?

To ask these questions is extremely timely and important. It is also important to state the fact that US have not been consulting about its deal with Taliban either with Afghani government or with any other regional ally like Pakistan, let alone Russia and CA governments. Whether Washington recognises it or not, three key countries play an instrumental role in keeping and providing regional security in regards to Afghanistan in this part of the world — Iran in the western border of Afghanistan; Pakistan in the South and Russia in the North. All three powers have immediate interests in keeping the geopolitical environment stable.

### *Taliban perspective*

Taliban has become a powerful force in Afghanistan for quite some time controlling between 40 to 50 % of the territory and launching relentless attacks in almost every Afghan province. So far the movement has been pursuing two key objectives: removal of all foreign troops from the country and seizing the power in Kabul to run according to Sharia law [2]. In other words to re-establish Taliban power across the country. The latter objective also indicates that Taliban have no plans to share the power and might try to grab it by force once there will be no foreign interference.

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Today Taliban represents complex elaborated structure with different branches holding different views on reconstruction of Afghanistan, its governance and other social, political and economic issues. There is no guarantee that if split inside out, Taliban would continue following the deal with Americans.

The deal involves gradual reduction of the US troops, exchange of the prisoners, and non-violence from Taliban and other affiliated groups towards US and its allies. This means there is still a long road to walk until complete and final withdrawal.

Both parties also agreed to release the prisoners which in effect suggests that situation might get even more unstable in the near future [3]. There might be more bloodshed and violence when thousands of radicals get released. Particularly bearing in mind the grudge they surely harbour towards the official government.

According to the deal Taliban should stop any cooperation with other terrorist organisations in the region. However it will be almost impossible to monitor, let alone to implement due to scattering of both Taliban and terrorists across the provinces and general opaqueness of the process. What is even more difficult is to comprehend the extent of the relationship Taliban has with others, like IS-K, Al-Qaeda and other groups. Furthermore Taliban refused to provide any tangible guarantees to not harm ordinary Afghan people. In other words, Washington somehow untied hands of the organisation, which in some countries is listed as terrorist one.

NBC claimed that according to the recent intelligence Taliban does not plan to keep the agreement and is currently waiting for US troops to leave the country as negotiated [4]. Another Taliban source located in Pakistan claimed that organisation is waiting for the troops to leave before striking official government in Kabul. It all coincides with the overall strategy Taliban leaders have been pursuing for years: war of attrition for the US led foreign troops. Back in 2001, removed from power they still planned to overthrow whatever government was put in place. Taliban loathed and condemned official government of Karzai and never ceased the resistance.

Violent attacks started occurring mere days after signing the deal, as if mocking Americans. Firstly Taliban denied it was their doing, but later started openly attacking government forces for failing to negotiate the release of the prisoners.

On 19 May, New York Times reported that 20 Afghan provinces out of total 34 witnessed some sort of fighting. Kunduz located in Afghanistan's North close to Tajikistan has been under Taliban's siege recently. United Nations had reported over 200 civilian casualties in April 2020 alone counting as a significant increase in numbers from the same period of last year. A truck full of explosives was rammed into Afghan intelligence office killing 9 and wounding 20 people. Afghan National Security Council highlights that Taliban implemented roughly 55 attacks per day starting from March 1, the very next day after the deal was signed in Doha [5].

Both sides blame each other. Taliban claims that Afghan government is failing to comply with the deal to release sufficient number of prisoners, while Kabul went offensive in response to the increased attacks by Taliban across entire country. Washington is struggling to keep the role of the mediator while observing as more civilian lives are lost with less ground to pretend that their hard bargained deal is still functioning.

Kabul too didn't prove to be easier to deal with. Experts claim that not only Taliban is split and presents certain difficulties to communicate. One of the major impediments to the ongoing peace process lies in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan. One might call it a perpetual confrontation between newly elected Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his contender former Prime Minister Abdullah Abdullah. History of the confrontation between Ghani and Abdulla is long and recurring. Each of them is trying to pull the power and influence away from each other and is more preoccupied by their personal struggle. The timing of such confrontation could not have been worse because it might also negatively impact future negotiations. In the end they managed an arrangement to establish High Council for National Reconciliation with Abdullah Abdullah to lead it [6].

The fact that Ghani's government has not been duly consulted with before and during the negotiations between Washington and Doha suggests that the parties had an informal understanding that despite scandalous concessions Kabul would have to comply with the results of the deal. The answer is simple: Washington holds strong leverage over the official Afghan government. The nature of this leverage lies in the ongoing American assistance as well as future promises. And here we are talking about billions of dollars of different type of assistance both provided and pledged. Ghani cannot simply ignore or forget it. That is why he would have to come to terms with Taliban at some point and act as asked, if his government intends to continue receiving Western aid. Needless to say, NATO assistance volume is closely tied with American benevolence.

*US view*

Decision of US President Donald Trump to sign the deal had more to do with his struggle to keep his pre-election promises to end the war in Afghanistan as well as neo-isolationism policy. Indeed US has been fighting in Afghanistan from 2001, withdrawing partially in 2014. The war has been steadily draining American resources in almost all directions: depriving Washington of gigantic amount of funding, time, people and even international prestige. Over 2500 US military personnel had been killed during the war; over 778 billion US dollars spent for the military campaign and over 44 billion US dollars covered the reconstruction efforts in the country [7].

Today geopolitical environment in the Middle East is rapidly changing, with Washington lagging behind those changes. Some of which were partially caused by US, like the rise of the conservatives in Iran and Iraq demanding withdrawal of US troops. If the deal with Taliban would indeed work resulting in total withdrawal from Afghanistan Trump Administration can claim it as one of its rare strategic and foreign policy victories. It is particularly important to note that such move ahead of his re-election campaign adds bonuses and should beef up his approval ratings for the American audience.

Washington first started negotiations with Taliban in 2018 followed by eight negotiation rounds in 2019. The process has been stalled in September 2019 after one of the Taliban attacks killed an American military. In late November 2019 President Trump arranged an unexpected visit to Kabul to meet President Ashraf Ghani. He confirmed the willingness to continue the negotiations with Talibs in order to achieve peace settlement [8].

United States is still planning to pursue operations against Al Qaeda and Islamic State as well as provide security assistance to Afghanistan's national forces and the army. However the level of commitment for US leadership to continue being involved into Afghanistan's affairs remains under discussion.

Already few experts regard the deal sceptically claiming that current withdrawal will not be fully completed and foreign troops would stay in the country continuing their assigned tasks as it happened previously in 2014. The then President Barak Obama also decided for a full-throttle withdrawal forcing regional powers to brace for the upcoming destabilisation and disturbances. What followed was that traditional NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) turned into limited Resolute Support mission again under NATO with a fewer number of instructors and advisors left in the country.[9] Bearing in mind this precedence external experts continue shaking their heads as to what is about to follow regarding the latest deal. There are too many factors capable of introducing anarchy and unpredictability into the equation.

*Other powers' involvement*

Russia also held negotiations with Taliban separately, rising alleged suspicions of latent assistance to the movement from the West. However long lasting peace and stability in the country bordering three Central Asian states appear as urgent and important for Moscow as well. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov confirmed the support for the deal between US and Taliban [10].

Kazakhstan had also expressed its own interest in following events in Afghanistan as it directly concerns Central Asia. Talgat Kaliev, Special Representative of Kazakhstan's President for Afghanistan is tasked with working together with other foreign partners to enhance the interaction concerning Afghanistan issues. Kazakhstan is open to negotiate both bilaterally and multilaterally with appropriate parties with the purpose of combatting terrorism, extremism, as well as illegal drug trafficking and migration [11].

Presently our country is actively engaged in assisting Afghanistan socially and culturally: over 50 million US dollars were allocated to bring Afghan students to live and study in Kazakhstan; other type of assistance had been provided worth 80 million US dollars.

Out of the other Central Asian states, Uzbekistan is the other country closely watching and monitoring situation in Afghanistan. It rightly perceives itself as buffer state between Afghanistan and Central Asia and has been steadily increasing its border security over the years. Uzbek government indeed thinks strategically in this regard and attempts to serve as a bridge between Kabul and other Central Asian neighbours.

Uzbek delegation took part in the official ceremony of signing the Agreement in Doha, Qatar. Tashkent has been actively engaged in the peace process in Afghanistan by providing the platform for the dialogue. One can mention 2018 International conference on Afghanistan attended by United Nations and Afghan government's delegates held in Uzbekistan. Uzbek Minister for Foreign Affairs Abdulaziz Kamilov claims that Uzbekistan is on the forefront of fighting terrorism and extremism stemming from Afghanistan and remains to be most concerned about the situation in that country due to the shared border [12]. Sometimes Tal-

iban forces cross the borders to escape from Afghan government forces which in turn leads to border clashes with CA countries.

Still Tashkent perceives Afghanistan as a land of opportunities able to provide land-locked region a long desired access to the Indian Ocean, and turn into transportation hub to diversify export routes for CA republics. However these opportunities cannot be reached until Afghanistan finds the path to peace and stability.

There is another important power to consider whose interests have not been clearly identified in the long run and it is China. Strong both politically and economically, what China lacks is a power projection in the region. However Beijing has been running its military outpost in Pamir mountains at the Tajik-Afghan border for some time now. China has been heavily investing into Central Asian region since the launch of its One Belt, One Road initiative and logically intends to protect those investments.

### Conclusion

Taliban still plans to restore their legitimacy as they issued statement claiming that their duty is to restore Islamic government in the country under the leadership of Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada. The group also plans to change the name of the country from Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Both Russia and US stated that international community would never accept restoration of the «Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan» as it brings forward too many negative connotations [13].

However the concern over renaming of the country should be the last priority for now. In the aftermath of the deal instead of subsiding the violence had reached new levels. While Islamic State is increasing their attacks Taliban continues claiming no responsibility. How should one interpret this chain of events? Does it mean that Taliban cannot control the actions of Islamic State within their territory? Or it means that Islamic State is trying to show who really controls the country?

All these factors entail many questions and very few answers for Afghanistan's neighbours, including Central Asia. Islamic State has been actively promoting its idea of establishing Islamic Caliphate on the territories of Central Asia since 2014. Thousands of Central Asians left to fight for ISIS in the Middle East, followed by their families in most cases. Once ISIS has been defeated in Syria some of them returned home, yet others went to Afghanistan to join ISIS branch there. Exact figures remain unknown. And it is Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) as the group is known today emanates the real threat for Central Asian Republics, rather than Taliban whose main objective is to restore the power back in their home country.

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### **АҚШ-тың Ауғанстаннан шығуы: Орталық Азия елдері үшін жаңа «ескі» перспективалар**

Мақалада Дохада 2020 ж. 29 ақпанында Америка Құрама Штаттары мен Талибан арасындағы соғыс қимылдары мен негізгі шарттарды тоқтату туралы жасалған келісім сипатталған. Орталық Азия мен Ресейдің перспективалары, сондай-ақ Талибан мен Вашингтонның егжей-тегжейлі көзқарастары қарастырылған. Мәміледен кейін бірден Ауғанстанда талибандар мен ресми ауған ұлттық күштері мен армиясы арасында зорлық-зомбылықтың жаңа толқыны басталды. Мақала мәміленің Орта Азия елдеріне қандай пайдасы мен жалпы аймақтық қауіпсіздікке ықпал ете алатындығына жауап беруге тырысады. Мақсаттардың бірі — Орталық Азия елдері үшін АҚШ пен Талибан арасындағы келісімнің нақты мәнін анықтау. Мақаланың мақсаттарының ішінен мыналарды атауға болады: «Талибан» келісімді аяқтағысы келетінін анықтауға тырысу; «Талибан» мен ел ішінде жұмыс істейтін басқа да террористік ұйымдар арасындағы қарым-қатынастардың дәрежесін түсіну; Ауғанстанның ресми үкіметі мен Вашингтон арасындағы тұрақсыз қатынастарды және олардың Келісімге қалай әсер ететінін ашып көрсету. Осы қысқаша баяндаманың нәтижесінде АҚШ пен Талибан арасындағы қол жеткізілген келісімдер аясында Орталық Азияның аймақ ретіндегі келешегі белгісіз. Елде жалғасып жатқан зорлық-зомбылық пен террорлық шабуылдарға қарамастан, Талибанның басты мақсаты — билікті қайтарып алу; ал Ислам мемлекеті өзінің ықпалын бүкіл маңайда, соның ішінде ОА-да таратуды жоспарлап отыр.

*Кілт сөздер:* Ауғанстан, талибандар, Қазақстан, Өзбекстан, Ислам мемлекеті, АҚШ, Гани, бейбіт реттеу.

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### **Выход США из Афганистана: новые «старые» перспективы для стран Центральной Азии**

В статье описана сделка, подписанная 29 февраля 2020 г. в Дохе, между Соединенными Штатами и движением Талибан о прекращении военных действий и основных условиях. Рассмотрены перспективы стран Центральной Азии и России, а также подробные взгляды как талибов, так и Вашингтона. Сразу после сделки в Афганистане вспыхнула новая волна насилия между талибами и официальными афганскими национальными силами и армией. В статье предпринята попытка ответить на вопрос: «Как именно эта сделка может принести пользу странам Центральной Азии и внести вклад в общую региональную безопасность?». Одна из целей — определить реальное значение сделки между США и талибами для стран Центральной Азии. Среди задач статьи можно отметить следующие: выяснить, действительно ли талибы намерены выполнить свою часть договоренностей; понять степень отношений между талибами и другими террористическими организациями, действующими внутри страны; выявить фактор сложных отношений между официальным афганским правительством и Вашингтоном и их влияние на выполнение договоренностей. Результаты этого краткого доклада касаются неопределенного будущего Центральной Азии как региона в контексте достигнутых договоренностей между США и Талибан. Несмотря на продолжающееся насилие и террористические акты в стране, главная цель талибов — вернуть себе власть; в то время как Исламское государство планирует распространить свое влияние на все ближайшее географическое окружение Афганистана, включая регион ЦА.

*Ключевые слова:* Афганистан, талибы, Казахстан, Узбекистан, Исламское государство, США, Гани, мирное урегулирование.