

“The Events in Afghanistan 2021: Impact on Security in Central Asia”

Introduction or Background. Have you ever been in a situation when you wanted to say: "Wait a minute, this had already happened"? The déjà vu effect is nothing new in personal everyday life. Besides, numerous treaties reflect on how history repeats itself. However, sometimes rehashing the old days still can have a dazzling impact, becoming all the more acute when it affects the interests of all key international players at once. Surprisingly, exactly that happened in September 2021, marked by the USA withdrawal from Afghanistan, which felt almost like a return to 1989, when the Soviet Union had done the same. Neither great power achieved stated goals in the disturbed state, dooming it to get stuck in political instability under the aegis of religious radicals, would it be Taliban or Afghan Mujahideen. However, as Mark Twain once said: "History Doesn't Repeat Itself, but It Often Rhymes." And today, we indeed might see some differences. For example, the danger that this time Afghanistan might drag the whole region into a global turmoil.

Since the world moves towards multipolarity, no wonder global powers like the US, Russia, and China, as well as regional powers like Iran and Pakistan, have a clear intention to engage in the Afghan events and influence the regional situation. Inevitably, the Central Asian region, trying to balance in the midst of the altered 'great game' and to some extent directly bordering Afghanistan, sense that they are at a higher risk of radicalization, uncertainty, and humanitarian challenges. Thus, this essay strives to assess the nature and probability of impending risks in Central Asia with reference to each state's domestic situation and their relation with adjoint external actors.

Main Body of the Essay. In spite of pessimistic projections that expect Afghanistan's advancement to Central Asia, there are factors of uncertainty that might result in the lesser evil. For now, the Taliban government is divergent and initially would be busy with

managing its internal structure. That would determine the subsequent development vector and foreign policy objectives. At this point, several deals are possible. In the first idealistic scenario, they would fulfill claims regarding inclusive government, peaceful life, and women's rights (Doucet, 2021; Robertson, 2021). However, even after a couple of months, this proved to be too naive. According to Human Rights Watch (2021), 47 former regime personnel were killed within 2.5 months. Secondly, society might assume they would distance themselves from the 1990s vicious and violent behavioral pattern and be satisfied with establishing the local Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, setting international recognition as the ultimate point. Indication of this might be several meetings held between Russia, China, the USA, Pakistan, and the Taliban before and following the Afghan regime change (Hansler, 2021). Lastly, Kazakh national political analyst Satpayev (2021) proposed the worst-case scenario. He sees a threat in case Afghanistan would be ruled by a more radical group like the Haqqani network, supported by Pakistan and other terrorist organizations. The author further draws a parallel between the latest and the Islamic State, whose aims, unlike current Taliban political negotiations leader, Mullah Baradar, are military expansion and domination in Central Asia. Politologist's primary concern is the absence of the buffer zone, provided by the Northern Alliance thirty years ago, consolidation of Afghan field commanders. Therefore, today, the region needs to patch the security bugs, notably, the vulnerable Turkmen-Afghan border, to be prepared for the possible intervention.

The sufficient defensive capacity of Central Asia is extremely precarious. Among five states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, only Kazakh and Uzbek are combat-ready. It should be pointed out that states have bilateral or multilateral military arrangements. For instance, if Turkmenistan is under attack, Uzbekistan will join the war. Furthermore, states not neighboring Afghanistan still have initiatives to protect the region. Kazakhstan clearly illustrates that: terrorists' breakthrough to the Caspian Sea will

damage the whole of Western Kazakhstan, the state's key economic sector of oil and gas. Therefore, in terms of security, we might see Central Asia as a united block. However, neither of the two had engaged in hostilities. Contrastly, the Afghan military honed its skills due to its long-standing experience and practice. The average count of the Taliban army is 80,000 troops (Wintour, 2021). Moreover, they have access to modern weaponry left by Americans. Thus, even if joint Central Asian forces will level in quantity, the qualitative military power equilibrium is dubious.

A simple solution, in this case, would be strengthening alliances. But there are difficulties in this direction as well. To avoid dependence on neighboring states with neoimperialist hegemonic ambitions Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan evade close connections to China and Russia. For instance, Uzbekistan suspended its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (SCTO), led by Russian Federation. Thus, for Russia, amplifying the scale of the Afghan threat - foreign foes - would be a nice move to promote the necessity of Russian protection and strengthen its position in the region. Especially, taking into account that China has been successfully displacing Russian regional presence in economic and investment terms.

As evident in the recent talks discussed in Hansler (2021), Pakistan plays the role of a mediator between Afghanistan and the rest of the world. Also, it closely connects to the radical international network Haqqani (Britannica, 2021). Therefore, it has the potential to shape the discourse of Afghanistan internal structure and external decisions. Considering its partnership with China and more or less favorable attitude to Russia, it can be assumed it will not encourage conflict escalation in Central Asia, which is a compilation of global powers' interests (even despite Pakistani animosity towards the US).

For the USA, the terrorism question in general and Afghanistan in particular always was a question of building a more attractive election campaign. Bush and Obama intervened

in the Middle East as a public act of revenge for 9/11, Arab Spring, and the Boston marathon. Occasionally, Afghanistan did not become a small victorious American war, intended to increase President's popularity. Therefore, Trump and Biden simply ended wasting enormous money on the wallflower war. As evident, it never considered humanity and people's suffering when engaged in Afghan question. Therefore, even if it helps Central Asia to protect itself, no one guarantees that would sustain itself long.

The main problem in this section rhetoric is that Central Asia represents an object, a tool for achieving someone else's geopolitical interests, losing its sovereignty and authenticity. Therefore, all five states must build their self-sufficient alliance or security system instead of relying on external help. Ironically, Afghanistan itself might be a lesson for Central Asian states that overdependence of external actors, would it be SCO/CSTO in our case or Soviet/American army in Afghanistan at different times, inevitably causes a risk of becoming a failed state. Nevertheless, the recent Nagorno-Karabakh case demonstrates that proper modernization and innovation are feasible for competitive confrontation. Thus, while Afghanistan spends time on managing its internal systems, Central Asia might use this uncertainty as a stimulus or security advantage and address the need to enhance military resilience on mitigation-preparation stages, it can repel the attack of the Taliban, who are used to guerilla warfare instead of a head-on collision.

However, not all security menaces lie in the military dimension: there are a lot of red flags within the Central Asian socio-political systems. The terrorist organization Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, operating since 2001 and supporting Al-Qaeda, is not necessarily a product of the Greater Middle Eastern terrorists' influence solely. According to the UN Security Council report (2008), their first attacks targeted Uzbekistan's interests before the switch to supporting the Taliban and Al-Qaida (2008). On top of that, religious extremism and radicalization processes in (post-)soviet states gradually launched even in the late 1980s -

1990s. Hundreds, if not thousands, of CIS citizens, voluntarily depart to Pakistan, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq to join ISIS or other big terrorist organizations (Lemon, 2018). If the current Afghanistan situation would trigger those radicalized people to mobilize and build up a network within Central Asia, ISIS and Haqqani might use them as Trojan horses, causing a social disturbance and destabilizing the region more than the direct Taliban attack would do. However, the emergence of radicalized groups within Central Asian states itself is not Afghanistan's fault - domestic governments per se are the ones to blame. Poor socioeconomic conditions, inequality, brain drain, lack of ideological values, and ineffective religious education cause people's desperately distorted perception of religion.

From this point, let's focus on some of the Central Asian states and their prospect on a case-by-case basis. Throughout the years, Uzbekistan was the most active and prominent contributor to negotiations on Afghan issues: it held a conference in 2018, where stated its readiness to host discussions, also, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov even attended the ceremony of the USA-Taliban peace deal (Helf, 2021). Therefore, Uzbekistan is probably the only Central Asian state that has already established direct contacts with Afghanistan, and other states would manage the situation under its facilitation. Probably, Uzbekistan would use the "my enemy's enemy is my friend" principle and would use Afghanistan under Taliban rule for containment of its domestic extremist sentiments discussed earlier. Moreover, besides political matters, according to Satpayev (2021), Uzbekistan has crucial economic projects involving Afghan territory - "the railway from Mazar-i-Sharif to Pakistani ports through Herat - an important route for Uzbekistan to reach sea routes."

Differing from well-prepared Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan is the most vulnerable brick in Central Asia. There are rumors that Pakistan's ISI organization is keen on cooperation with Turkmenistan on gas trade routes, which might make it a semblance of deterring buffer zone. Anyway, due to Turkmen neutrality politics and relative isolationism, it is hard to assess its

relations, or the state's independent preparedness to protect such a wide border of 735 km. On top of that, radicalization is a serious problem in Turkmenistan as well. Overall, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan need to be even more attentive as Afghanistan is marked by a huge proportion of people of Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmen ethnicities.

Kazakhstan, being the farthest from Afghanistan, did not consider Afghanistan issue a key factor in its foreign policy. Correlating with its multivector policy approach and ambition to lead the region's humanitarian-diplomatic field, previously, all Kazakh proposals predominantly dealt with humanitarian aid and economic support. The government still adheres to this approach, providing Afghanistan with basic household essentials, food products, and vaccines (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, 2021).

Conclusions & Recommendations. In conclusion, for this moment, Afghanistan events are hard to predict and the future actions of all states would be determined after the final distribution of power between different factions (Taliban, Haqqani, Mojaheed) would be clear and stable. In any case, Central Asia has to adapt to the situation and start multidimensional preparation right now. First of all, states would need to protect the most vulnerable territories like Turkmenistan. Secondly, in terms of general security, it is preferable to abstain from relying on the US, Russia, and China, which might help them in defense but still would be pursuing their own goals, and build up a strong, self-contained regional alliance. Lastly, they need to address the problem of domestic extremism and radicalization, closely related to their domestic governance problems. Afghanistan case showed the world that the US sample imposition of values, ignoring population's needs and peculiarities, does not always work (the regime did not withstand even promised three months), and people might turn to violence seeking justice. Therefore, if Central Asian states would fail to improve their systems and satisfy people's basic needs, there is a threat of their population radicalization.

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