

Confidential

RUSSIA

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Vadim Kozyulin reports from Moscow:

AFGHANISTAN: AN IMPASSE FOR GENERALS, A CHANCE FOR DIPLOMATS

SUMMARY

In December 2018, President Trump ordered the Pentagon to prepare a plan for a withdrawal of 7,000 US troops from Afghanistan - which is about half of the US forces currently deployed in that country. In January 2019, the president made a proviso that the announced pullout would be conditional on achieving some kind of a peace agreement.

What are the prospects for a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan? What are the interests of the parties involved, including the United States, the regional actors, and such global powers as Russia and the EU? And what is the impact of the internal Afghan dynamics on that process? Vadim Kozyulin, Director of PIR Center's Asian Security Project, addresses these and other questions.

The US mission in Afghanistan: current status

Judging from the current state of affairs in Afghanistan, the **American and NATO Afghan mission has reached an impasse**. More than 20,000 people were killed in Afghanistan in 2018 - **more than anywhere else in the world, including Syria**.

There is a growing number of incidents of Afghan police officers being taken hostage by armed rebels. Service in the Afghan armed forces is a very dangerous proposition, but unemployment is so high that there is no shortage of willing candidates. Ethnic minorities make up 60-70% of the rank and file, whereas the majority of senior officers are from the country's dominant Pashto group. With ethnic tensions already running high, such an imbalance represents a real threat for the government.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan's Western partners are still refusing to equip the country's armed forces with heavy artillery or heavy ground-attack aircraft, **highlighting their apparent lack of confidence in the Afghan military.**

ISIS is becoming a new threat for Afghanistan and its neighbors. Even though the ideology of the so-called *Islamic State* runs counter to the Afghan peoples' religious beliefs and culture, many of the ISIS supporters fleeing from Syria and Iraq have found a new haven in Afghanistan. Military activity by ISIS militants has been reported in 30 different districts of Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, representatives of the various branches of the US military and security establishment **differ in their assessments** of the situation in Afghanistan.

The Pentagon tends to highlight the positive dynamics. In 2016, it resurrected the practice of attaching its military and civilian advisors to the Afghan ministries and government agencies. It has also noted an improvement in coordination between the Afghan special operations forces and police units. Additionally, Afghanistan has established its own Air Force; it remains small, but it is training to deliver air strikes without relying on Western support. NATO is augmenting its forces stationed in the country with engineers, communication, reconnaissance, and artillery units. Interestingly, the Pentagon has modified the criteria it uses for assessing the situation in Afghanistan. According to these new criteria, losses are no longer viewed as a sign of deterioration of the situation, unless they are critical. A similar approach is used to any loss of control over territories: any temporary loss is not taken into account, so long as control is restored quickly.

But the U.S. Department of State and the American intelligence community offer a more pessimistic assessment - and it is that assessment that is viewed by the White House as the more realistic.

Breaking out of the Afghan impasse: the Trump strategy

Back in 2011, long before the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump criticized the U.S. government for wasting resources on the Afghan campaign, arguing that "we need to set matters right in our own country first".

The campaign in Afghanistan has not yet become an unbearable burden for the U.S. Treasury - but the American public can no longer see the point of spending vast amounts of money on a poor country 7,000 miles away. Meanwhile, **Trump desperately needs a demonstrable success** for his upcoming presidential re-election campaign, so he may well try in earnest to fulfill one of his 2016 campaign promises, which was to **pull U.S. troops from Afghanistan.**

Trump would therefore benefit enormously from a strategy that enables him to substantially reduce the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan but **preserve U.S.**

influence in the country by sponsoring pro-Western elites, while at the same time shifting the financial burden of propping up the Afghan economy on Afghanistan's regional neighbors.

The U.S. president may adopt the following strategy: demonstrate progress on a political settlement in Afghanistan over the next few months, and then dump the Afghan burden - or rather, sell it to the regional players, making them pay as much as possible for the privilege.

Since the U.S. government is now as eager as ever to achieve a political settlement of the Afghan problem, it is prepared to show a much **greater flexibility on such issues** as the future role of the Afghan opposition.

Right now, not all the Afghan political groups are equally involved in the settlement process. Despite the popular rhetoric about the reconciliation process being "Afghan-led and inclusive", the Afghans themselves have little say on these matters. The Afghan government is a product of U.S. planning and strategies, and essentially represents the interests of the United States rather than of Afghanistan itself. **That government has no influence on U.S. regional policies**, and has no say on the question of how long the U.S. forces will remain deployed in the country. The Afghan elections are an artificial mechanism of Western-style democracy, far removed from the realities that the ordinary Afghans must face, and having little impact on their lives. Many Afghans have far more confidence in the decisions of the Loya Jirga, which includes highly reputable representatives elected by the people, than in the Afghan government's policies.

Meanwhile, **the Taliban, a radical Islamist movement that wields a lot of clout in Afghanistan, is completely unwilling to tolerate U.S. meddling in Afghan politics** - and the U.S. administration is well aware of that. Zalmay Khalilzad, the US State Department's special envoy for Afghanistan, has nevertheless managed to persuade some of the Taliban representatives to take part in negotiations - probably by offering them important concessions. Abdul Ghani Baradar, the new leader of the Taliban's political wing, insists on a withdrawal of foreign troops as a precondition for talks. For the Taliban, the Afghan Constitution is not set in stone; it is merely a starting point for discussions, in which they are determined to advocate the Sharia law.

Is the Taliban the real power in Afghanistan?

According to the Afghan MoD, there are 21 terrorist organizations operating in Afghanistan, with a total of over 50,000 armed militants between them. The number of the Taliban fighters is estimated at 38,000.¹ The Taliban itself says that close to 600,000 of its supporters have been killed in Afghanistan since 2001.

The Taliban is active in 70% of Afghanistan's 399 districts. About 15m people - 50% of the country's population - live in territories controlled by the Taliban. The combined size of those territories increased by 5% in 2018.

The Taliban's annual revenues were estimated at 400 mln dollars in 2011; by now, they are thought to have reached up to 1.5 bln dollars. The main sources of those revenues include drug trafficking, foreign assistance, smuggling, extortion and

¹ More than 50,000 militants active in Afghanistan - defense minister. RIA Novosti, October 26, 2018. URL: <https://ria.ru/20181026/1531516078.html>

"taxes" levied on ordinary people, the provision of security services, and mining rents.

Financing through the informal funds transfer system known as the Hawala - which works outside the official banking channels - has become so reliable in Afghanistan that FATF (the Financial Action Task Force) has even dropped the country from the black list of nations requiring increased financial monitoring measures. Incidentally, one of the countries recently put on that list is Canada.²

The numerous military operations conducted by the Taliban in 2018 in several provinces, including Ghazni, Baghlan, Faryab, Helmand and Kandahar, demonstrate that the movement has an extensive logistical network capable of shifting large numbers of weapons and ammo. The Taliban's military achievements are all the more impressive for the fact that it does not have any aircraft, armored vehicles, or artillery, and its ability to concentrate large troop numbers in one place is limited. Nevertheless, **the Taliban can operate in a well-coordinated manner:** for example, in the summer of 2018, all its forces strictly abided by a ceasefire agreement for two or three days. Some experts also believe that the Taliban units may at some point acquire hand-built attack drones.

More than 20 countries are now in talks with various groups representing the Afghan rebels. The Taliban clearly regards that fact as a recognition of its success and a sign of progress towards its own eventual legitimization.

Another important consideration is that the Afghan rebels can afford to be patient and bide their time until an inter-Afghan settlement can be discussed without any pressure from Washington.

Settlement involving regional actors

There is broad support for an Afghan peace process among the external actors. None of them wants to see the country turn into a global breeding ground for drug trafficking and terrorism. That is why **Donald Trump can count on Afghanistan's regional neighbors**, all of whom want peace on their borders (although they differ on how exactly that peace can be achieved).

But Washington's plans for involving regional neighbors in resolving the Afghan problem still remain rather vague. The White House has yet to articulate what kind of foreign presence it deems necessary in Afghanistan. It remains unclear who will train and equip the Afghan security forces once a settlement has been achieved; what the rules for engaging foreign actors will be; or how Afghanistan can be integrated into the global economy, given that the country is landlocked.

According to the US national security strategy, two of Afghanistan's regional neighbors, **China and Russia**, are seen as the main threat to U.S. interests and global dominance. Another neighbor, **Iran**, is seen as a secondary threat, along with North Korea.

² Afghanistan removed from International Banking Grey List. Afghanistan.ru. June 27, 2017. URL: <http://afghanistan.ru/doc/111551.html>

U.S. diplomats recognize the importance of involving influential neighbors in resolving Afghanistan's problems.³

But the U.S. sanctions on Iran pose an additional obstacle to an Afghan settlement because Iran is a key country providing connectivity for the region's nations, and its port of Chabahar, along with other transport links across the Iranian territory, is important to every country in the region.

Kabul has expressed interest in participating in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. As part of that project, Beijing has promised to spend 60 bln dollars on building power plants, motorways, railways, and high-capacity sea ports.

The EU is also pinning great hopes on a transit corridor between Europe and China. The idea is that the neighboring states - including Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan - will also benefit from this new transport link.

The European Union has long abandoned any strategic vision it may have had for the future of Afghanistan. European leaders have no real impact on the situation in the country and seem content to follow Washington's lead; their own contribution consists primarily of reiterating their exhortations for security and stability. Europeans in general are tired of the Afghan war and of the bad news it brings. The EU states remain capable of bearing the financial burden of the Afghan campaign for the sake of geostrategic interests, but the EU's passive role is becoming increasingly difficult to tolerate - especially since the Euro-Atlantic partnership itself has been under strain since the arrival of the new U.S. administration.

In view of the position of the regional states, it is safe to assume that **a regional consensus would be impossible to achieve so long as the United States maintains its dominant role.** The U.S. scenario for Afghanistan is based on the idea that the country should remain Washington's puppet, with a fig leaf of democratic institutions maintained for propriety's sake. Such a model runs counter to the interests of many neighboring states. It is clearly not viable, and it's only being kept alive thanks to continued Western financial support. For that reason, we should not pin any great hopes on the Kabul process, which is merely an instrument of the U.S. policy.

The neighboring states are groping for another format of discussing the Afghan situation. There are several alternative options, but the Shanghai Cooperation Organization seems to be the most suitable venue for negotiations on Afghanistan. After all, now that India and Pakistan have also become members, the SCO includes every single one of Afghanistan's neighbors, with the sole exception of Turkmenistan.

The Russian factor

For the time being, Afghanistan remains on the periphery of Russian interests. Other parts of the world, such as **Syria, eastern Ukraine, Libya, and the DPRK** are at the top of the Russian security agenda.

³ Z.N. Kabulov, Director of the Second Asia Department, speaking in an interview with the Russia Today international information agency. February 8, 2019. http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/about/professional_holiday/news/-/asset_publisher/I5UF6lkPfgKO/content/id/3508361

In fact, the Kremlin is not entirely unhappy with the existing state of affairs in Afghanistan. The threat of terrorism serves to reinforce the commitment of Moscow's CSTO allies and Russia's own central role in that organization. Efforts to counter drug trafficking have become one of the top items on the SCO agenda. Lack of security in Afghanistan serves as a deterrent against the North-South infrastructure projects that could undermine the Central Asian republic's strong ties with Russia. Last but not least, it is the United States and its allies, rather than Russia, who are bearing the burden of neutralizing the Afghan rebels.

Fighting the **Afghan drug trafficking** could be used as a plausible pretext for an intervention: street drugs have become a real bane of many Russian cities. Afghan opium trafficking through Russia is currently estimated at 20bn dollars a year (the global figure is thought to be close to 70 billion). In 2017, there were 800,000 registered drug addicts in Russia, and 5,000 Russians are killed by drugs every month. But the Russian public has learnt to ignore that problem, and the drugs epidemic seldom draws headlines in the Russian media.

For Russia, the most worrying aspect of the Afghan situation is the **growing ISIS presence in the country**. Meanwhile, intelligence reports suggesting that the United States is providing support to some of the Afghan rebel groups pose an obstacle to U.S.-Russian cooperation in fighting terrorism.

For its own part, Washington is alarmed by media reports claiming that Moscow provides weapons to the Taliban in northern Afghanistan. But at the same time, the United States has no constructive agenda to offer Moscow: any Russian efforts in Afghanistan will be seen by the White House as subversive. In the existing climate of mistrust, the United States tends to avoid any cooperation, despite the fact that the U.S. and Russian interests in Afghanistan (such as fighting terrorism, suppressing drug trafficking, and achieving stability) largely coincide.

In 2018, the Kremlin began to demonstrate a surprising degree of creativity in its Afghan policy, especially after the second Afghan meeting in the Moscow format, which became a social outing opportunity for the Taliban. Another successful idea was the **Inter-Afghan Dialogue conference** held in Moscow on February 5-6, 2019. The event did not involve any representatives of the Russian government, and was convened at the initiative of the Afghan diaspora in Russia. No Afghan officials took part, either, but it was attended by representatives of the Taliban and of the former Afghan president Hamid Karzai. The reasoning for such a format was simple: official Kabul follows Washington's lead in completely ignoring Moscow - and Moscow ignores it back. The Kremlin has decided that it would partner instead with the moderate part of the Taliban and with those Afghan politicians who are not part of the current government. It is trying to forge informal ties with the potential candidates likely to take part in the 2019 presidential race. The Taliban's political office in Doha seems to appreciate Moscow's new approach, and probably intends to emulate it.

The Kremlin's plan runs counter to parts of the U.S. strategy inasmuch as its vision for Afghanistan genuinely prioritizes the interests of the people of Afghanistan (whereas the United States intends to keep the country under the control of a pro-American elite, despite its declarations to the contrary). Russia, and the Soviet Union before it, have invested a lot of effort and resources in securing the border with Afghanistan, which is why Moscow is entitled to have a say in resolving the Afghan problem. The State Department does not seem to appreciate that fact, so the Russian diplomatic machine may well redouble its efforts.

In fact, Moscow is not alone in this: more than 20 other capitals are currently engaged in negotiations with Taliban representatives. Russian diplomacy's next move in this Grand Game is likely to be made in concert with partners from Pakistan, Iran, China, and the Central Asian states.

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