Washington's “Airborne Raid” on Turkmenistan

It's about time to carry on the discussion of the string of appointments of new US ambassadors to various states. In this context, one cannot overlook Washington's recent attempt to “establish military foothold” in Turkmenistan that occurred on June 25. It's curious that the role of the “landing task force” in this attempt was played by the new US ambassador to Ashgabat retired Colonel Matthew S. Klimow and his spouse - retired Major Edie Gunnels.

It's noteworthy that the diplomatic relations between the US and Turkmenistan were established on February 19, 1992. Over the last three decades, the gradual development of bilateral relations between those states led to a number of Western corporations getting engaged in such areas of Turkmenistan's economy as hydrocarbon production, IT technology, energy production, agriculture and logistics. Among the largest Western players on the local market one can find Boeing, General Electric, John Deere, Microsoft, Caterpillar, and Coca-Cola. Back in 2018, it was reported that there was a total of 156 major projects in development in Turkmenistan where US companies played a major part, with the total worth of those reaching 2.5 billion dollars.

Washington's interest towards Turkmenistan is guided by two principal factors. For one, Turkmenistan shares an 800 miles long strip of border with Afghanistan, with the Turkmenistani diaspora being second largest ethnic group in the latter state. Then, Ashgabat enjoys close ties with Russia, as it serves home to the 201st Russian military base.
Therefore, its imperative for Washington to maintain close ties with Turkmenistan in order to maintain free access to the territory of Afghanistan and put a foot in the door of economic development of its geopolitical competitors, namely Russia, China, and Iran.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been particularly active in Turkmenistan for years together with yet another entity funded from the US federal budget: the National Endowment for Democracy. The latter is well-known across the globe for the role it played in a number of coup d’etat attempts that it staged across multiple regions. It goes without saying that the above mentioned entities wouldn’t be capable of advancing their agenda without the assistance of a multitude of NGOs and biased media sources. In Turkmenistan, those are the Soros Foundation, Radio Liberty, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Eurasia Foundation, Internews, and others.

In turn, those are assisted by a myriad of smaller organizations, involving those engaged in polling, educational, and legal activities along with those representing various religious and ethnic minorities. This brings the grand total of officially registered non-governmental organizations operating in Turkmenistan to 3 thousand entities. Against this backdrop it’s hardly a coincidence that USAID has spent some 450 million dollars on various activities in Turkmenistan over the last three decades, with 23.6 million of those spent last year. The total expenditures of the National Endowment for Democracy last year alone in this Central Asian state exceeded 350 thousand dollars. That's a lot of money for a poor country. However, the United States has so far failed to raise a large pro-Western crowd in Turkmenistan, as it has already done in the neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

If one is to take into account the fact that negotiations about the possible accession of Turkmenistan to the Eurasian Economic Union are still ongoing, one can expect an acute activation of pro-American entities in Turkmenistan in the immediate future. It’s most likely that they are going to be pushing Ashgabat to play a more active role in the regional security efforts or initiate “further democratization” of the government structure.

In addition, we must not forget that Washington has been trying to put an end to Europe’s dependence on Russian gas for years, that is why discussions about the possibility of transportation of Turkmenistan’s gas to the West have been ongoing for more than two decades. Therefore, it is hardly a surprise that Donald Trump urged the new US ambassador to Ashgabat to initiate the discussion of the legal status of the Caspian Sea and investigate the possibility of exporting Turkmenistan's gas to the West through Azerbaijan via the Trans-Caspian pipeline.

As for the track record of the new ambassador, Matthew S. Klimow served as military advisor to the Secretary of State and on the White House staff as Special Advisor to the Vice President of the United States. It’s been revealed that from 2012 to 2015, Klimow served as a Deputy Assistant Secretary General of NATO in Brussels. He was responsible for management reform and operational planning for the new NATO Headquarters, the largest “public works” project in Europe at the time.

As a servicemen, Ambassador Klimow commanded infantry troops from platoon to brigade, to include the 2,000 paratroopers of the 18th Airborne Corps Combat Support Brigade at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He’s a combat veteran that served as a Combat Task Force Operations Officer during Operation Desert Storm in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Additionally, he served as a member of an interagency arms control team that negotiated the START III Treaty framework, contributed to the writing of the NATO-Russia Charter, and participated in peace talks to end the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

It has also been revealed that Klimow served as the Executive Assistant to the Vice Chairman and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. During the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, he was in the Pentagon and remained in the National Military Command Center with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the Secretary of Defense, coordinating the Pentagon’s response to the terrorist attacks.

The military experience of the army veteran and his spouse certainly attracts a lot of attention. Undoubtedly, this fact was no small factor in the nomination of Matthew S. Klimow to the post of the US ambassador to Turkmenistan, as there’s a lot of purely military matters that the US wants to address by taking advantage of the position of this Central Asian country. In addition, one cannot exclude the possibility that in Washington’s calculations, his courage may help him succeed in achieving the ultimate goal of Washington’s meddling in Turkmenistan, as a total of seven predecessors have all but failed on this quest. The directness and the strive to cut down to the chase that is often seen in the military men may be more advantageous for this task from the point of view of Washington than the soft language and refined manners of career diplomats. In fact, in his testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Matthew S. Klimow stated that he would “also work diligently to bolster America’s influence with the government of Turkmenistan.”
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