Peace and the Withdrawal of American Soldiers from Afghanistan Put on Hold

According to Hawa Alam Nuristani, Chairwoman of the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan, the current president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, came first in the country’s presidential election in late September, gaining 50.64% of the vote.

Meanwhile the media previously reported that the campaign team of another presidential candidate, the country’s Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, filed over 4,000 complaints about the preliminary results of the election.

According to a number of experts, the situation around the country’s presidential election further hinders the possibility of a de-escalation of the Afghan conflict. It’s more likely to provoke a political crisis, which would unfold against the backdrop of strengthening interethnic tensions. As a result, the civil war may become interethnic in nature.

The situation in Afghanistan is also exacerbated by the position of the US, which supports the current president, Ashraf Ghani. The US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, who concluded the next round of talks in Kabul on December 18, met with President Ashraf Ghani to inform the latter of his recent meetings and talks in Qatar and Pakistan, discussing joint actions for the upcoming period. At the same time, Khalilzad met with the other candidate for the presidential election, Abdullah Abdullah, with the leaders of political
parties and public organizations, as well as with the commanding officers of the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

However, Washington’s actions aimed at resolving the Afghan conflict don’t leave hope for improvement of the current state of things. Peace talks between US representatives and the Taliban movement (banned in the Russian Federation) have not yet yielded positive results. On top of that, after the 10th round of negotiations resumed on December 7 in Doha, talks are, once again, suspended and their possible renewal has been postponed until 2020. When the United States began firmly insisting on a ceasefire, the Taliban representatives negotiating in Doha took a time out in order to consult with the movement’s leaders in Pakistan.

According to representatives of the US military troops in Afghanistan, currently, the cessation of attacks in the areas where NATO bases are located is the key condition for the United States in negotiations with the Taliban. On December 11, an attack on the NATO airbase in Bagram occurred, resulting in 2 civilian casualties and over 70 people injured. What’s more, five Georgian troops were among the injured. On November 20, two soldiers were killed in a helicopter crash in the eastern province of Logar. On December 23, another US soldier was killed.

In total, 24 foreign troops were killed in Afghanistan this year, 22 of whom were American.

On December 20, the spokesman for the Taliban’s political administration in Qatar, Suhail Shaheen, reiterated that intra-Afghan negotiations will begin only after an agreement with the US on the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan is signed and that the talks will include all aspects of the Afghan agenda.

At present, about 20,000 troops from other countries are stationed in Afghanistan, most of them from the US. The United States Army has been in Afghanistan since 2001. Over the years of the war, 775,000 soldiers in total have been deployed to Afghanistan, of which 2,300 were killed. During the longest US military operation against the Afghan Taliban, the number of territories controlled by the movement didn’t decrease but increased instead. Earlier, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the United States is serious about withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan and achieving peace ‘through negotiations with the Taliban,’ but no concrete measures have been taken to this day.

On December 21, the US Congress approved the allocation of $15 million to the Pentagon ‘for the logistical support of the peace talks in Afghanistan.’ The defense budget for 2020 was signed by US President Donald Trump on December 20. According to the documents, the financial resources allocated to the Pentagon don’t entail direct payments to the Taliban. However, as noted, the costs can be allocated at the discretion of the Secretary of Defense after consulting with the Secretary of State.

In response to reports appearing in Western media about the USA’s intention to allocate funds for the Taliban, its spokesman Suhail Shahin made an official statement on Twitter: “The reports of some media that the US Congress approved a budget for the logistic support of negotiators from the Islamic Emirate are not true. This has not happened previously either. These messages are meant as a distraction. If the US had approved a budget to pay for the expenses of its team, it is their work, not the Islamic Emirate’s.”

The real use for the US taxpayers’ money allocated by Washington from the Afghan-focused part of its budget is clear from The Washington Post’s recently published analysis of the 2000-page secret document on the Afghanistan War titled “Lessons Learned”, which was intended to be seen only by White House officials. It is enough to provide just even one small quote from these writings, namely the admission of the former President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai in an interview with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR): “For years, the CIA delivered bags of money to my office, which was nothing unusual.”

“We created total corruption as a result of ‘flooding’ of the country with money,” US ambassador Ryan Crocker (2016) confesses in another interview with SIGAR. One of his employees said: “Travelers lugged suitcases loaded with $1 million, or more, on flights leaving Kabul. The country is unable to handle such a huge amount of money anyway...”

It is believed that the US government spent $133 billion on state construction in Afghanistan (to compare, that is more than the US spent after the Second World War on the restoration of the European economy). Since no one counted the money and still doesn’t, the funds were deposited into ‘the right hands.’ This was confirmed by forensic accountant Gert Berthold in an interview with SIGAR: “Afghans have stopped hiding how corrupt their country is. This is now a matter of prestige. I analyzed 3,000 Pentagon contracts worth $106 billion. About 40% of the money ended up in the pockets of insurgents, criminal syndicates or corrupt officials.”

However, despite the billions of dollars spent, the result is all but disastrous. The West has lost the battle for the
‘hearts and minds’ of the Afghan people. It is perceived in Afghanistan only as an occupying force.

In addition to the growth of anti-American sentiments, a round of sharp interethnic confrontation can be observed today in Afghanistan. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his party was legitimized, Pashtun politicians are striving to increase their influence on the country’s politics, the Hazaras, who were once a discriminated minority, now fill the halls of Kabul universities, and many Islamic parties have become more active.

General Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek and one of the chief field commanders in the Afghan War, constantly criticizes President Ashraf Ghani for not listening to his military plan to defeat the Taliban. He has been Vice President since 2014 while maintaining significant political weight and influence on pro-government forces.

Reading the American media about the practically endless negotiations between the Americans and the Taliban in Qatar, some might think that the United States is close as ever to leaving Afghanistan. However, this is not the case. There are still 13,000 infantry troops left, and the US Air Force is bombing Afghanistan three times more frequently than under President Obama. Over the three months of fall, the number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan set a new disappointing record over the last 10 years, reaching 4,313. This was announced on November 1 by John Sopko, the Head of the SIGAR.

The atrocities of the CIA in Afghanistan are so egregious that even the totally US-controlled President Hamid Karzai spoke out against them in 2013. And in 2012, the International Criminal Court officially recognized the crimes committed in Afghanistan by the American special services and the groups supported by them. “Members of US armed forces appear to have subjected at least 61 detained persons to torture, cruel treatment, outrages upon personal dignity on the territory of Afghanistan between 1 May 2003 and 31 December 2014,” was written in the report of Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda.

CIA-backed Afghan shock troops shot people without holding trial and committed other serious offenses in Afghanistan, according to a recent report by the human rights organization Human Rights Watch. According to the report, these troops killed and abducted civilians during night raids and carried out attacks on medical facilities, apparently in order to provide medical assistance to the militants.

In 2018, the Donald Trump’s administration introduced a new strategy for resolving the conflict in Afghanistan. However, from the facts cited above, one can see what this updated ‘program for peace in Afghanistan’ has actually become and whether peace in this country in the near future is even a realistic possibility.

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